

Shayna and Calenhad

by LMSharp

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Summary: When Duncan told Gwyn Cousland to seek out another Grey Warden, she went looking for another middle-aged, grim-faced veteran. She found instead a young man with a hauntingly familiar face. She had no idea she had also found her destiny. A series of one-shots following Alistair and Gwyn Cousland through the Fifth Blight. Will go slightly AU at the end.

## 1. Castle to Knight

**\*\*Disclaimer:** Most of the dialogue is directly from Bioware's  
**\*\*\_\*\*Dragon Age: Origins\*\*\_\*\*. All rights disavowed.\*\***

**\*\*Chronology:** Ostagar.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Castle to Knight<p>

The Circle Mage stalked off, and the young knight turned so she could see him clearly for the first time. "One good thing about the Blight is how it brings people together," he drawled. He had seen Gwyn's interest in his conversation with the mage, and now looked for someone to share in his amusement.

Gwyn was not amused. While the mage had certainly begun the altercation, the young man before her had hardly attempted to defuse the situation. "With our mages as courteous as that man and our knights as diplomatic as you are, ser, Ferelden is certain to sweep the darkspawn away before our united front," she said, moving to pass him. She'd been instructed to find this Alistair, and she couldn't be bothered to malign mages with this youth.

The young man didn't step aside, though. Instead, he stood around looking chastened. He rubbed the back of his neck with his gauntlet.

"Iâ€¦uhâ€¦I suppose I could haveâ€¦erâ€¦handled the situation better, couldn't I? Wait, we haven't met, have we? I don't suppose you happen to be another mage?"

Gwyn arched an eyebrow. "Would that make your day worse?"

"Hardly. I just like to know my chances of being turned into a toad at any given moment," the man replied.

Gwyn had to own some appreciation of the young knight's wit, inappropriate and untimely as it might be. She thawed, just a little. "I imagine among mages that must be a worry for you, ser," she said, with only the slightest emphasis on you. "Fortunately for you, I am no mage, and you are safe from me." She bowed. "Gwyn is my name."

The man came to attention, and his eyes focused on her. "Wait, I know that name. You're Duncan's new recruit from Highever. I should have recognized you right away. I apologize."

Gwyn reassessed the young man in front of her. "You're Alistair, then? I was looking for you." She was somewhat surprised. For some reason, she'd been imagining that Alistair would be another grim-faced veteran like Duncan, not this fresh faced boy. She wondered how long he had been shaving. He couldn't be much older than twenty, no older than she. Certainly not the bleak warrior she had expected, and fair, too. Rather beautiful, actually, tall and strong with close-cropped fair hair and warm, frank hazel eyes. He strongly reminded Gwyn of someone, actually, but she had no time to consider it, because he was speaking again.

"Did Duncan mention me?" he wanted to know. "Nothing bad, I hope." He let it be and instead explained his purpose. "As the junior member of the order, I'll be accompanying you when you prepare for the Joining."

Gwyn bowed again. "I am honored," she said politely.

Alistair looked hard at her a moment. "You know it just occurred to me that there have never been many women in the Grey Wardens," he observed. "I wonder why that is?" He didn't sound doubtful of her abilities, just honestly curious, so Gwyn shrugged.

"No worries, ser. I can defend myself."

The corners of Alistair's mouth turned up. "I'm getting that impression. So I'm curious. Have you ever actually encountered darkspawn before?"

Gwyn tried not to think of Fergus, out there in the Wilds Andraste knew where, facing those things. What if they slew him, too? She turned away to hide her face. "Have you?"

"When I fought my first one, I wasn't prepared for how monstrous it was," Alistair recalled. "I can't say I'm looking forward to encountering another."

Gwyn considered the young man, but though he was confessing to fear, she did not get an impression of cowardice from him. On the contrary, if she were any judge of character, she'd wager Alistair had handled

himself well and bravely against the darkspawn. It was refreshing to hear a man confess to honest disquiet in front of her, though, rather than attempting to boast of his feats.

"Anyhow," Alistair said, perhaps a little embarrassed of his honesty after all, "Whenever you're ready, let's get back to Duncan. I imagine he's eager to get things started."

Gwyn shrugged again and started walking, and Alistair fell into step beside her. "So what was that argument I saw about?" she inquired of him, just to make conversation.

"With the mage? The Circle is here at the kings' request," Alistair explained, "And the Chantry doesn't like that one bit. They just love letting mages know how unwelcome they are, which puts me in a bit of an awkward position. You see, I was once a Templar."

Gwyn had been trying to remember just who it was that this youth reminded her of so strongly, but now she slowed. She did see, and she felt shame now that she had been so severe with Alistair. "That would be awkward," she murmured, remorseful.

Alistair shot her a reassuring glance. "The Chantry raised me until Duncan recruited me six months ago," he told her. "I'm sure the Revered Mother meant it as an insult, sending me as her messenger, and the mage picked right up on that. I never would've agreed to deliver it, but Duncan says we're all to cooperate and get along. Apparently they didn't get the same speech."

Now eager to change the subject, Gwyn asked her companion if she would be preparing for the Joining with the other recruits.

"Daveth and Ser Jory? Yes. They're wandering around the camp somewhere. Have you met them?"

"Yes, both of them."

"That makes things easy then," Alistair said with satisfaction. "They'll both be back with Duncan by now."

"Right then. This should be interesting," Gwyn said, as they approached Duncan's campfire. "I look forward to traveling with you," she added to Alistair.

Alistair seemed surprised by this. "You do? That's a switch. If you have any questions, just let me know."

Gwyn nodded, and the two of them approached Duncan to hear all about this Joining.

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><p><strong>AN: Thanks to ElyssaCousland, who recommended I repackage these as a single story. I wasn't sure I wanted to do so. They're very loosely connected, except that they are all concerned with Cousland and Alistair and their changing relationship, but I did find one overarching theme and named the story for it. Review if there's something you want to say. \*\*

\*\*LMS \*\*

## 2. In Death, Sacrifice

**\*\*Disclaimer:** Dialogue you recognize is from the game. If you don't recognize it, it's original, but all rights are here disavowed.\*\*

**\*\*Chronology:** In Lothering, after the Warden has talked with Alistair about Duncan's death.\*\*

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><p>In Death, Sacrifice<p>

Gwyn and her companions did their best to clean up, leaving the bodies of the bandits where they lay on the highway. Gwyn eyed them without regret. Though the men had asked them for mercy when it had become clear they were outmatched, they had been ready to murder them before for a few silvers. Who knew how many helpless refugees they had killed in the past? Or how many they would have gone on to kill if she had let them go? She had given them the opportunity to face justice with honor. Since they had refused to do so, she felt no guilt striking them down and protecting others from them in the future.

Gwyn passed a water skin around to Alistair and Morrigan, and poured a little of the water into a dish she carried for Cavall specifically for that purpose. All of them drank, then without speaking, turned off into the road that led down into the town. As they crested the hill, they saw the village below in the morning light.

"Well there it is," Alistair sighed. "Lothering. Pretty as a painting."

"Ah, so you have finally decided to rejoin us, have you? Falling on your blade in grief seemed like too much trouble, I take it?"

The condescension in Morrigan's tone was thicker than plate armor. As he had antagonized the mage at Ostagar, so had Alistair antagonized the apostate at their first meeting in the Wilds, and Morrigan was apparently the sort to hold a grudge. She had clearly decided to dislike him, and had already begun to needle him at every opportunity. Not that the dislike was at all one-sided. Raised in the Chantry, Alistair just as clearly (and not unreasonably, Gwyn thought) harbored a deep suspicion of apostates, but trained as a Templar, he had not developed the diplomatic abilities most others possessed not to share his suspicions with apostates. Instead, he had been trained to attack them, and though now he was obliged to work with one, he still would not curb his tongue or check his manner, any more than Morrigan herself would.

Gwyn sighed. It was already looking as if it would be a long, long road.

Alistair was trying to defend himself. "Is my being upset so hard to understand? Have you never lost someone important to you? Just what would you do if your mother died?"

Morrigan returned coolly, "Before or after I stopped

laughing?"

Although Gwyn had suspected Alistair's appeal would do no good, the witch's callousness was shocking, infuriating. Didn't she know what she had? Gwyn clenched her fists and kept her temper in check with effort, and Alistair folded his arms. "Right. Very creepy. Forget I asked."

Ignoring the witch, Gwyn turned to her other companion. "Alistair. You had something you wanted to talk about?"

"His navel, I suspect," Morrigan interjected. "He certainly has been contemplating it long enough." She smiled, pleased with her own wit.

Alistair was not amused. "Oh, I get it. This is the part where we're shocked to discover how you've never had a friend your entire life."

Morrigan's eyes flashed, and Gwyn suspected Alistair had scored a hit, but the witch said, "I can be friendly when I desire to. Alas, desiring to be more intelligent does not make it so."

Gwyn had had enough. "Lay off, Morrigan," she snapped. Their task was hard enough without her companions sniping at one another, and the witch was just looking for a fight. Morrigan raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips, but subsided. Gwyn turned pointedly to Alistair. "Alistair? Please," she said politely, gesturing for him to speak his piece.

Alistair's ears were red. He cleared his throat. "I just thought we should talk about where we intend to go from here," he said, apologetically.

Gwyn looked down into the town. She wondered where the tavern was. There ought to be news available there of the soldiers who had escaped from Ostagar. "I need to look for Fergus," she said, half to herself. "He wasn't in the battle. He might still be alive."

Alistair blinked. The silence stretched a moment. "I'm sorry," he said. "Who is Fergus?"

"My brother," Gwyn explained. "King Cailan said he was out scouting in the wilds before the battle."

Morrigan sniffed. "Attempting to look for him there would be foolish," she said. "He is either dead or he managed to flee to the north."

Alistair shot her a disgusted look. "Very sensitive."

Morrigan spread her hands. "I am simply saying that it is foolish to mount a rescue when you have no notion where this man is and the Wilds are overrun with darkspawn," she reasoned. "You will either find him somewhere outside the Wilds with other survivors, or not at all."

A picture of Fergus outstretched in the Wilds, a darkspawn spear through his chest, flashed into Gwyn's mind. Fergus' head on a pike,

somewhere in those ruins, or his corpse on a spit over one of their filthy fires. Or Fergus, somewhere else, alive, but with no idea their father and mother were dead, his wife and son, that their murderer held his teyrnirâ€|

King Cailan had promised to bring Howe to justice. Cailan, who lay dead on the field at Ostagar.

A lump like a stone rose in Gwyn's throat. Her face flamed, her heart pounded wildly. "I have to find him!" she cried.

Morrigan shook her head. "You wish to do this brother of yours a service? Avenge him. The time to look for survivors will come later."

Before Gwyn knew what she did, she'd turned on Morrigan with a snarl. Her hand flew to the pommel of her dagger and she saw the witch's golden eyes widenâ€"not in fear, but in surprise. Alistair had moved between the two of them, but Gwyn had already stopped short.

"Hey, hey! We have to work together, here."

Gwyn's hand had already dropped from her dagger. Everything that had happened was breaking over her anew like a tidal wave, and she struggled to breathe. She groaned, and turned away, raking her fingers through her hair. Cavall whined, and pressed his body up against her leg. She put her hand on his head.

Alistair was still watching her, ready to intervene if she should get violent again, but with more sympathy than wariness now. "You're close to your brother," he murmured.

"Yes, but that's not the onlyâ€"he's the onlyâ€" "All at once, it was just too much. The lump in her throat had blocked all powers of speech, and Gwyn's eyes stung with tears until she was blinded. Helplessly waving the others away, to do what they would, she walked off to be alone for just a moment, just a few moments. She stopped walking when she'd gone about a quarter mile away and sat down on the wall by the highway, losing herself to tears at last, for the first time since the fall of Castle Cousland. Had it only been a fortnight? Only a fortnight, to lose everything, for her entire world to fall to pieces around her. With Duncan and the king dead, everyone who knew what Rendon Howe had done, everyone capable of granting her justice, was dead, too, and she was alone. Alone, forbidden from seeking out all the family she had left, constrained to fight a Blight with only a dog, a cold and cruel apostate mage, and a Grey Warden with scarce six months more experience than she had, a youth hardly able to grow a beard. Gwyn sobbed until her chest ached and her face was hot, until her eyes were swollen and her throat raw. She tore her hair and punched at the wall beside her with futile fists, then she wrapped her arms around her dog until she'd quieted at last, soothed by his worried whimpers and steady breathing, his warm tongue on her fevered face and steady sympathetic brown gaze.

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><p>She hadn't gone far from the village. He found her sitting on the wall by the highway, arms around her mabari like she was about to break apart. She'd been crying. Her nose was all red, her eyelashes all clumped together and wet with tears. She looked like a little

girl, Alistair thought. He hadn't noticed at first. Gwyn was so commanding, so brave, so level-headed, but he wondered if she was really any older than he was after all.<p>

She was lost in whatever sad memories she had fled here to feel alone, stroking her hound's coat and staring into space, and she didn't notice him for a long moment. When she did, she looked behind him for the witch. "Morrigan's where you left us," he explained. "At least, I think she is. Honestly, I don't care." Morrigan was an apostate, and furthermore, very unpleasant. He had to say he definitely wouldn't mind ditching her here in Lothering.

Gwyn was obviously still angry with her, too. "Nor I. The witch can hang for all I care!" she snapped. Then she slumped. "I didn't mean that," she sighed. "I didn't ask her to come with us, but I'm certainly glad of her help, howeverâ€|abrasiveâ€|she may be. It's hardly her fault, after all. I doubt she's ever had a proper conversation in her life. Can you imagine, living alone, with just thatâ€|" She shook her head. "She justâ€|she tread on sensitive ground. She could hardly know it, but there it is."

There was that annoying empathy for apostates again, Alistair thought. Oh, well. He supposed they wouldn't be ditching the witch in the near future. But that wasn't important right now, he reminded himself. That wasn't why he'd followed her out here. He had to see what was bothering Gwyn. She'd talked to him about Duncan. They were all each other had out hereâ€|just the two of them, all alone against the Blight. If they didn't have one another's backs, they had nothing at all.

Keeping a wary eye on her hound, Alistair carefully sat beside his fellow Warden on the wall. "Gwyn, can you talk to me? Thisâ€|" he gestured at her tearstained face, the way she was hunched over her hound, like the dog was the only thing in the world she could count on. "This isn't the Wardens. You didn't know them like I did. It's deeper than that. I thought something was wrong when we met. You were soâ€|distant," he decided. "What happened in Highever before Duncan recruited you? Some of the Wardens wereâ€|saved, for lack of a better word. They came to the Wardens because they had nowhere else to go. Well, you heard Daveth's story. They were going to hang him. Was itâ€|was it like that for you?"

She was quiet a long time, but right before Alistair decided she wasn't going to tell him after all, she spoke. "My name is Gwyn," she said. Her voice was thick, thick with tears, thick with grief. "Gwyn Cousland. I was the second child of Bryce Cousland and his wife Eleanor, teyrn and teyrna of Highever."

The raw despair in her tone turned Alistair's blood to ice, and he knew he was going to be sorry he had asked for this story. "Was?" he repeated. "So youâ€|"

The words came out of her now like she'd been waiting to say them, like they'd been building inside of her for days. "The king called his forces to Ostagar. Our friend, Arl Howe, was to come with his soldiers to leave with my father and our knights in the morning, while my brother went ahead with some of our other forces. My mother was going to go to visit a friend of hers, while I was to remain behind to guard our lands. It was to be the first time I was ever charged with such a responsibility. Duncan had come to test one of

our knights, Ser Roland Gilmore, as a possible recruit to the Grey Wardens. When we met, he told my father I was also a good candidate, but my father refused. There weren't any others of us, just me and Fergus. He didn't want to lose all his children to the Blight. Duncan wasn't going to press the issue."

No, Alistair thought. This was not going to be one of those happily-ever-after stories. This was going to be one of those cheery Grey Warden fireside tales where everyone died in the end. "What happened?" he whispered.

"Howe's men. They attacked in the middle of the night. We never saw it coming. Arl Howe had always been our friend. He used the Blight, the king, as an excuse to bring his soldiers to our home—and then he took his chance. They'd taken the castle before we knew what had happened. They killed my brother's wife, my sister-in-law, and her son. They were unarmed, defenseless. Oren—"my brother's son—"he wasn't even seven years old. My mother and I saw their bodies on the floor, dismembered, hacked to pieces—"

Tears had started running down Gwyn's face again, and she shook and shook and couldn't stop. Her hazel eyes were wide, but she wasn't looking at him. He knew she was seeing her sister-in-law and nephew's mutilated bodies once again. How long ago had this been? Days? Just a few weeks? And she'd just been walking around, carrying this with her. And I asked her if she'd ever lost someone close to her, he thought to himself, furious. Idiot.

"My mother and I found weapons, a servant, a man-at-arms. We fought our way through Howe's men—"this—"Gwyn drew the sword she carried with her dagger on her back. Alistair looked at it. It was a fine blade, centuries old, by the look of it. An heirloom weapon. "This is the only thing we could save from our home. They tore apart our chapel, killed my tutor, my mother's friend, her son and lady-in-waiting—Ser Gilmore held the gates with just a few knights to give my mother and me time to escape through the servant's exit in the larder. I heard—I heard them break through." Gwyn swallowed, and sheathed her sword. "Howe's men had already found my father once when we found him. Duncan—Duncan helped him escape to the servant's exit. But—not in time. He'd been wounded. He was dying. I wanted to get him out of there. I begged Duncan to help me save him, help to get him and my mother and all of us away, but—it was too late. My father—couldn't be saved. Duncan promised my father he'd get me out. Me and my mother, but only if—only if—"

"Only if your father agreed to let you join the Wardens," Alistair finished for her. Gwyn's eyes flashed. Her lips puckered, like someone had just fed her a lemon, but she glanced quickly at Alistair, then looked down at the ground. He had gotten the impression that she had asked about Duncan before because of what the Warden-Commander had meant to him, and not because she mourned the man, but now Alistair realized with some sadness Gwyn had never had a chance to know his Duncan. To her, Duncan was the man who had killed Ser Jory at her Joining, the man that had taken her away from her dying father. She—she had probably hated the man, and given her story, he wasn't sure he could blame her. But even now, she wouldn't admit to it, out of respect for his feelings. She just hugged her hound, which—he realized might actually be the last connection she had to her old life.

"I agreed, because my father asked me to agree, to save myself and to see justice done to Howe. But then my motherâ€|she refused to leave him. She was fine! I'd kept her safe! But she said she'd slow us down, that her place was with my father, that she'd keep Howe's men from following usâ€|andâ€|"Gwyn stopped her story, hissed in a breath, and with another look at Alistair, shook her head.

Alistair took her hesitation to mean that Duncan had saved her against her will, in the end. Saved her, but left her mother to the death she had chosen. "Gwyn, Iâ€"I'm so sorry," Alistair said. There were no words. The woman beside himâ€"she had lost everything. "I had no idea."

Gwyn sat up, and her eyes blazed at him, "And now you tell me I can't look for my brother, to see if I've lost him, too, to tell him that his wife and son and parents are dead and he is teyrn of Highever and we must see Howe answer for his crime," she spat, furious again now. "I'm not to do any of that. I'm merely to accept he's dead or out of my reach, and see to my duties as a Gray Warden, and Iâ€" "Gwyn groaned again, and hit the wall beside her with her fist. It was already bruised from similar action, Alistair saw.

He caught her wrist before she could hurt herself more. "It's not that easy."

"'In death, sacrifice,'" Gwyn recited savagely. Words from the Warden's motto. "We start dying the minute the chalice touches our lips, don't we? We kill everything we were before, everything we'd ever hoped to be or do in the future, and we spend the rest of our days dying, sacrificing our lives for a victory we never live to enjoy. And this time, who's to say we're dying for a victory at all, Alistair? If it's all for nothing, if we can't stop the Blightâ€|"

Alistair couldn't stand to hear more. Her grief was too much. He brought her hand to his chest, pressed it. She fell silent. "We will," he promised her. "We will defeat the Blight, Gwyn. You and me. For Duncan. For all of them. For your family, we will stop the Blight. Then we'll find your brother, and we'll see this Howe pay for what he's done. I swear it."

"So did the king," Gwyn answered. "And yet?" She gestured with her arm, as if to say here I sit, and nothing has changed. She gave a bitter little smile, and gently, extricated her other hand from Alistair's. "You're very sweet, Alistair. But let's not make promises we can't keep. We don't know what's going to happen. There aren't any guarantees. Fergus might already be dead, and if that's the case, so are the Couslands. I'm a Warden now, whether I like it or not. I have a duty. Even if it kills me. 'In death, sacrifice.'" She closed her eyes, shuddered once. She scratched Cavall's ears, and he turned his head to lick her fingers.

By the Maker, it hurt, Alistair thought, to see her so beautiful, and so sad, to be so helpless to comfort her. The sun filtered through the clouds to shine on her brown hair, lighting it up with red and gold, but there was no warmth to it, and she shivered again. She was cold.

Hesitant, very uncertain he was doing the right thing, Alistair placed his arm around her shoulders. "At least we're in this

together, right?" he asked. "Please let me help, Gwyn," he added.

She looked up into his face, surprise written across her features. She almost smiled, before her face crumpled again like a piece of tin. "Maker help us, Alistair," she half-laughed, half-sobbed, and he was certain he'd got it all wrong, but then she sort of fell on top of him. His mail clinked with the force of her fall. Alistair gasped, and tightened his grip instinctively so she didn't keep falling right off the wall and into the dirt. She fisted her fingers in his shirt and buried her face in his shoulder.

This was a new. Alistair hesitantly brought his other arm around her back and he held her as she sobbed. He felt he very much wanted to run, but at the same time, there wasn't another place on earth he could think of that he'd rather be. His thoughts raced at a mile a minute. Gwyn was so close, and it felt wrong holding her like this, like he might spontaneously combust any second. Or be struck by lightning. But she was crying, and that was even worse. Except she was still clutching at him like she was afraid he'd vanish into thin air or something, so that meant he had to be doing something right, didn't it? Maker help us, indeed! Alistair rubbed her back awkwardly, and waited for it to be over.

And, after a few minutes that seemed to last a lifetime, it was. Gwyn let go of him, and she stood, scrubbing at her cheeks with her hands.

Alistair stood with her. "Are you ready to go on?"

"No," she answered, "But we've got to, anyway."

Yes, Alistair thought, that about summed it up. They still hadn't made a plan for going on, but Alistair figured that they probably needed more information anyway. Probably better to wait until after they'd gotten more news.

As if she'd read his mind, Gwyn snapped her fingers at her hound, and he fell in step at her heel. "We should go find Morrigan," she said. "See what the news is in the town."

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><p><strong>AN: I did make a few changes to Alistair's dialogue before I went completely off-book. It's ridiculous that Alistair just knows who Fergus is and what the king said about him, unless he'd been stalking Cousland and/or Cailan before first meeting Cousland. So I had Gwyn explain. Leave a review if you've got something to say,\*\*

\*\*LMS\*\*

### 3. Unimportant

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\*\*Chronology: En route from Lothering to the Circle Tower.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Unimportant<p>

Gwyn poked at the charred venison in tonight's stew. She grimaced. Her effort tonight was no better than Alistair's last night. She had learned to hunt years ago. No one had ever thought to teach her to prepare the meat she killed. Nan had always been there to do it for her at day's end. Gwyn remembered her nurse's broken body on the stone floor of the kitchen, and pushed her meal aside. If meal it could even be called. Now she wished she had asked Morrigan to help prepare their food as Alistair had wanted. She had held back from making the request in an attempt to appease the apostate who clearly would not have accompanied them without her mother's command, to show her she would not be a servant in their party, but a companion, but she remembered the smell of Morrigan's stew. There was no comparison.

Gwyn eyed their newest companions from Lothering. Could Sten or Leliana cook, she wondered? At least Cavall seemed happy enough, gnawing the meaty bones of the deer Gwyn had killed for tonight's meal. But Alistair had an expression of noble forbearance as he worked his way through his portion beside her.

To distract him from the horrors of her first culinary efforts, Gwyn started up a conversation. "So tell me about yourself, Alistair. You said Arl Eamon raised you, before you went to the Chantry?" That was an interesting tidbit he had dropped at Flemeth's, Gwyn thought. It was hardly common practice for noblemen to take in orphans, and she had not heard that Arl Eamon was particularly eccentric or compassionate in that way.

Alistair dropped his spoon into his bowl, just for a moment. "Did I say that?" he laughed. "I meant that dogs raised me. Giant, slobbering dogs from the Anderfels. A whole pack of them, in fact." He grinned at Gwyn, inviting her to share in his silliness, but there was a brittle, nervous edge to his smile.

Sensitive subject, Gwyn gathered, so she backed off, as was only polite. She raised an eyebrow and smiled back at him. "Really? That must have been tough for them."

Alistair's grin widened. "Well, they were flying dogs, you see," he confided. "Surprisingly strict parents, too, and devoted Andrastians to boot."

Gwyn nodded with mock solemnity. "Anders are supposed to be very religious."

"That, and make a great deal of cheese." Alistair looked down at his dinner, no doubt wishing for a fine cheese right this moment. "Funny, but the dogs never mentioned cheese. As a matter of fact, if you said 'cheese' around them, they'd start growling. Isn't that odd? Or did I dream all of that?" He looked up at Gwyn with that lopsided smile. "Funny, the dreams you'll have when you sleep on the cold, hard ground, isn't it? Are you having strange dreams?"

He was babbling. He did that when he was nervous, Gwyn had found. It was fairly easy to shut him up, though. "Only the ones where the

world is threatened by darkspawn," she replied.

Alistair stopped smiling as he remembered the nightmares she had been having, the magnitude of the task before them. He dropped his gaze. "Mm. Point taken." His joking effectively killed, he addressed himself to Gwyn's former question. "Let's see. How do I explain this? I'm a bastard," His words were blunt, and came too quick for Gwyn to respond. "And before you make any smart comments, I mean the fatherless kind. My mother was a serving girl in Redcliffe Castle who died when I was very young. Arl Eamon wasn't my father, but he took me in anyhow and put a roof over my head. He was good to me, and he didn't have to be. I respect the man, and I don't blame him anymore for sending me off to the Chantry once I was old enough."

The firelight cast its dancing light over Alistair's features, and Gwyn stared, as she felt all the blood draining from her face. Ever since she had met Alistair she had been trying to think why it was he looked so familiar to her, of just who it was he reminded her. She knew now.

Alistair's hair was shorter. Strawberry blond instead of straw gold. He had hazel eyes instead of blue. His face was a bit more angular, his body a bit more muscular, and of course he was several years younger. But the resemblance was still striking. Uncanny.

\_Arl Eamon wasn't my father, but he took me in anyhow and put a roof over my head. \_

Arl \_Eamon\_.

Gwyn's breath was coming shallow now, and too, too fast. She clenched and unclenched her fists. It couldn't be. She would have heard. People would know, right? She had to be wrong. In the most controlled voice she could manage under the circumstances, she asked carefully, "The arl wasn't your father? So you know who is?"

Alistair's answer was just as careful. "I know who I was told was my father. He died even before my mother died, anyhow."

Were it not for how Alistair had worded his answer, Gwyn could have relaxed. If his father had died before a mother he did not even remember, then what she suspected was impossible. Butâ€| "You didn't answer my question," Gwyn said. "You don't believe that man was your father, either, do you? \_Do you know who is\_?"

She leaned forward, clutching the hem of her shirt in her fists. Alistair hesitated, but shook his head. "It isn't important."

Gwyn swallowed, then she nodded slowly. He would tell her if it was as she suspected, wouldn't he? If it was what she thought, after the Battle of Ostagar, he couldn't \_not\_ tell her.

Oh, Maker. The battle. Why had he been sent with her to the Tower of Ishal?

Unimportant. He said it was unimportant. "Okay. Okay."

It wasn't true. It couldn't be. The Maker wouldn't do this to her, charge her with this, \_this\_ on top of everything else. And Alistair! Andraste's teeth, she liked the boy! If she were right, what would

become of him? Loghain wanted them dead badly enough as it was.

But if Alistair said it wasn't important, it couldn't be what she thought. Crazy to think so, no matter how much he did look like...Arl Eamon raising him was just a coincidence. Alistair's mother had been from Redcliffe. And he had been the newest recruit to the Grey Wardens, after her. He'd scarcely been there six months longer than she had. If the king had wanted to keep her out of the battle, it made sense that he would want to protect Alistair, too. He wanted only the best with him against the darkspawn. Not that that him any good, thanks to Loghain. Mac Tir will answer for his crime before the Landsmeet.

She was crazy. Crazy. She'd put it out of her head. "Anyway," she said, recovering herself. "How did you end up at the Chantry?"

Alistair shrugged. "Arl Eamon eventually married a young woman from Orlais, which caused all sorts of problems between him and the king because it was so soon after the war. But he loved her. Anyhow, the new arlessa resented the rumors which pegged me as his bastard. They weren't true, but of course they existed. The arl didn't care, but she did. So off I was packed to the nearest monastery at age ten." He looked away. "Just as well. The arlessa made sure the castle wasn't a home to me by that point. She despised me."

Gwyn frowned. She'd seen the orphanages in Denerim, seen the children on the streets, dressed in rags, ribs visible through the rents in their clothing, begging for coppers, falling to the pavement when the guard struck them for stealing. "You were probably luckier than most orphans," she said.

"I suppose you're right," Alistair agreed, "I wasn't raised as the arl's son, though, if you're picturing that. I slept in hay out in the stables, not on silk sheets. I remember I had an amulet with Andraste's holy symbol on it," he recalled. "The only thing I had of my mother's. I was so furious at being sent away I tore it off and threw it at the wall, and it shattered." He shook his head. "Stupid, stupid thing to do. The arl came by the monastery a few times to see how I was, but I was stubborn. I hated it there and blamed him for everythingâ€¦and eventually he just stopped coming."

The picture of neglect and abandonment Alistair painted, in short, simple words, was still sharp enough to pierce Gwyn's heart. She could see it. Alistair had not starved growing up, but he had been unhappy enough, to be sure. Relegated to the arl's stable like an animal, made to feel every moment he breathed that he did so only by the arl's charity. Bastard. A living, walking, talking embarrassment, for many. Bastards heard their mothers called whores, even if they were products of rape. Even the poorest, meanest peasant spat upon a bastard, if that peasant was the legitimate son of his father. Alistair had heard enough of that, judging by his earlier defensiveness. Still, the arl had tossed the child just enough kindness to firmly attach him to the one person in the world to show him any at all, only to leave him open to the cruelty of his wife and finally give him to the Chantry when Alistair had become trial enough to the domestic peace at Castle Redcliffe. At least Eamon had seemed to feel guilty about his treatment of the boy, Gwyn thought. Well he should.

"You were young and angry," Gwyn said. "With good reason."

Alistair shook his head. "I may as well have been raised by dogs, the way I acted," he told her. "But maybe all young bastards act like that, I don't know."

Gwyn turned bodily on the log to face Alistair. "Hear me," she told him. "It is no shame to be born a bastard. A shame men are unfaithful to their wives. A shame men abandon women to raise their children alone. But that is not your fault. Don't ever let anyone tell you it is, Alistair."

Alistair smiled at her. "An uncommon opinion from a noblewoman, Gwyn."

Gwyn dismissed this, impatient. "Most nobles are idiots. You're no less than any other man, and when others insult you because of your birth, they degrade themselves, not you."

"I wonder how often you have been insulted, my lady," Alistair replied. He was still feeling sorry for himself, but it was also an opinion many people shared, Gwyn knew, that a noblewoman could know nothing of how cruel people could be.

"You'd be surprised how much time nobles spend trying to tear one another down," she answered. "At times, things could get very nasty when my family went to court at Denerim. But my fatherâ€"my father always said a person of honor does not need to tear others down to feel important, and insults are nothing but hot, empty air. They only ever carry the weight you give to them."

"He sounds like he was a good man," Alistair said softly.

"He was," Gwyn closed her eyes, for just one moment, then opened them again. "He would have liked you, too," she added. "My father never judged a man by his birthâ€"only by the way he chose to live his life."

"He would've liked me, \_too\_?" Alistair grinned. "Are you trying to tell me something, my lady?"

Gwyn shoved him hard. "Don't get a big head or anything. My mother wouldn't have thought much of you. When Duncan came and started talking about recruiting me to the Wardens, she hated the idea worse than Father did. She never did like her little girl camping in the wilderness and learning to throw knives accurately from twenty paces. She would have far rather I settled down and married a nice young arling and got busy producing half a dozen beautiful, noble grandchildren."

"So why didn't you?" Alistair challenged.

Gwyn shrugged, and grabbed her bowl and Alistair's. Despite the poor quality of the meal, he had eaten every bite. She started walking to the stream to wash the dishes, and Alistair came with her. "Can you imagine \_me\_ as some arling's trophy wife?" Gwyn demanded.

Alistair chuckled, picturing it. "You would plague your poor husband's life out, my lady."

"If he married me for my title, for an alliance, with no respect for my own capabilities and desires, you can be certain I would," Gwyn agreed. "I am the daughter of a teyrn, and my father raised me to be every bit as capable as my brother. I never met the man who was prepared to take me on my terms, as a partner in every sense of the word, not merely a decoration for his house, a feather in his cap, a mother for his heirs. I refused to settle for less."

Scraping the food remains out of the food bowls with gravel from the bed of the stream, Gwyn was suddenly sad. "Not that I have the option now," she said. She thought of Fergus again, wondered if he was alive, or if she was truly the last of the Couslands. If so, it was more than likely the line would end with her.

"Come now," Alistair urged her. "It's not common for Gray Wardens to have families, but it isn't unheard of, either! I knew several Wardens thatâ€"he stopped. His face fell.

Gwyn shot him a sideways glance. "I wonder how many children lost their fathers at Ostagar," she murmured.

"Too many."

"And how many brothers?" She withdrew the now clean bowls from the stream, but didn't look away.

"I promise you, Gwyn: when the time comes, we will search for your brother," Alistair told her.

"No, I know," Gwyn answered. And she did. For whatever reason, she trusted Alistair. He would keep his word, she knew. "That wasn't what I meant." She searched his face. But no, every feature did, it did point right back toâ€|

He said it was unimportant.

Alistair held her gaze with a quizzical expression. "Hey, cheer up, you," he said at last. Then, quick as a bear plucking a salmon from the stream, he darted his hand into the water and splashed Gwyn.

She squealed in surprise and outrage, and splashed him right back. The dinnerware lay forgotten by the bank as the two of them dissolved into an out and out water battle like two children. And when all was said and done, in the middle of all the darkspawn and their dark, uncertain destiny, with all the weight of the past and the expectations for the future on their shoulders, Gwyn thought, that's what they were: two children, scarce twenty, doing their best not to mess everything up.

But when the fight subsided, and she and Alistair stood on the bank, drenched, exhausted, laughing like lunatics each at how ridiculous they were being, how ridiculous the other looked, how Leliana would laugh when they got back to camp, and Sten would scowl, how Morrigan would scold- after all that there came a moment when the laughter passed away, and they were left staring at one another, silent. A breeze blew by, and Gwyn's skin broke out in gooseflesh with the sudden chill. A drop of water rolled down her cheek, ran down her neck and over her collarbone, and into the collar of her linen shirt. She saw Alistair watch its progress, and she let him. She did not turn away or rebuke him, and so she was still watching when his eyes

darkened, and color flushed his cheeks. The tips of his ears turned brick red, and Gwyn knew what Alistair was thinking, because it was in her mind as well. How tall he was, how the light of the fading sunset turned everything about him to gold.

Perhaps they were not such children, after all.

Now Gwyn turned away, embarrassed. She picked up the dinnerware and started back toward the camp, where Leliana had covered the stewpot to preserve their breakfast tomorrow, and Sten had put the venison she had not used in the stew on a spit to roast. They could hang the cooked meat to dry afterward, and eat it on the road. Behind her, she heard Alistair following, heard him disappear into his tent, probably to change out of his wet things. She would have to follow suit soon, before the evening grew cold.

Unimportant. She'd have to cling to that.

Unimportant, who his father was. So as long as Alistair maintained it was unimportant, she would believe him. She would believe they were safe. Well. As safe as the only two Grey Wardens in Ferelden in a Blight could ever be. She would believe Loghain Mac Tir only sought their blood as the last two witnesses to his treachery at Ostagar, and for no other reason. That no darker fate, no greater responsibility hung over her friend and companion than that she shared with him: to stop the Blight. That when they fought side by side, and she held his life in her hands, the life of her friend and companion, the only other Warden in Ferelden, was all she held. It was enough. If she were responsible forâ€"but she was not.

He said it was unimportant.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: \*\*\*\*I really do think Cousland would guess, especially my Gwyn. I imagine she's been to court a number of times, and though she hadn't met Cailan in person before Ostagar, she might have seen him from a distance, and maybe her family did meet Maric. And Alistair looks very much like Cailan, enough that I think telling her he was a bastard, raised by Maric's brother-in-law, when Cailan had kept him back by name from the battle, would really be enough. Leave a review if you've got something to say,\*\*

\*\*LMS\*\*

#### 4. Duty

\*\*Disclaimer: Rights to Bioware.\*\*

\*\*Chronology: After the Circle Tower, just before entering Redcliffe Village for the first time.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Duty<p>

They crested the last hill, and Alistair stopped as they looked down on Redcliffe Village for the first time. The morning sun reflected off the cliffs and back on Gwyn's face. Her stubborn chin, slightly

long nose. Her eyes were positively golden in this light. She cocked her eyebrow at him, as if to say, \_What are you staring at, you? Let's get a move on. \_

Alistair's stomach twisted. He couldn't do it. People knew him here. He couldn't stand it if she heard it from anyone else. It felt too much like lying. He didn't want to lie to her. He had to tell her. "Look, can we talk for a moment?" he asked. "I need to tell you something I, ah, should probably have told you earlier."

Gwyn dropped her gaze, and her lips quirked down, like she already knew she wasn't going to like this. "Wynne, Sten, give us a moment, would you?" she called. She gestured for the others to hold position and wait on the road, then jerked her head for Alistair to follow her out of earshot. She'd seen he was uncomfortable, and was granting him privacy for this conversation. Maker, she was fantastic. He probably didn't deserve consideration like that.

Once they'd passed the point where even Sten might hear-if he had strange qunari hearing ability, that is, which might not be unlikely-Gwyn stopped. She folded her arms and bowed her head. She lookedâ€|resigned. Like she knew what he had to say, and was bracing herself, somehow. But that couldn't be, could it?

"What's on your mind?"

Alistair sighed. He'd never actually had to tell anyone before. Before now, everyone who had needed to know had always just known. Actually saying it was harder than he would've thought. "I told you before how Arl Eamon raised me, right? That my mother was a serving girl at the castle before he took me in?"

Gwyn's expression was clouded, unreadable. "I remember."

"The reason he did that was becauseâ€|well, because my father was King Maric. Which made Cailan myâ€|half-brother, I suppose."

She sort of slumped, after that. "It's as I feared, then," she murmured.

Alistair really almost yelped in surprise. "What? You knew?"

She squirmed, then, like she was really uncomfortable, and Alistair realized she hadn't wanted to have this conversation any more than he had. "I didn't know, per se," she qualified. "It's risky, claiming a bastard for a king without confirmation from another source, even in one's head. But I suspected, yes."

"You suspected," Alistair repeated. Maker, he sounded like an idiot, but it set his head spinning. The biggest secret of his life, and she'd just \_guessed\_! Was there anything the woman didn't know? "May I ask how?" he managed at last.

Her brow wrinkled then. Something almost like pity crossed her face. "You never met Cailan in person, did you?"

"Uhâ€|I never had that pleasure, no. I think he knew about me, but it's a bit awkward, isn't it? Acknowledging a bastard half-brother." Alistair looked down at his hands, struck, then back up at Gwyn. "Is it really that obvious?"

She gave this sad little smile. "It's quite a distinctive resemblance," she confirmed. "Uncanny, really. It was nagging at me from the moment we metâ€"that you reminded me of someone, but I didn't realize it was the king until you told me you were a bastard, raised by the Arl of Redcliffe. Eamon was Maric's brother-in-law, and well known as a confidante of His Majesty. Once I knew that, I wondered how I could have missed it. I wasn't sure, exactly. I didn't want to assumeâ€"but it didn't seem like a ridiculous assumption."

Now she said it, of course it made sense that she'd guessed. She'd been a lady, before. The Couslandsâ€"they were almost royalty themselves, weren't they? Oldest family in Ferelden. How many times had she been to Denerim? She'd certainly been on speaking terms with Cailan at Ostagarâ€"the king had conversed with her. Twice! When she'd arrived at Ostagar, Cailan had gone to meet her, and then at the strategy meeting, he'd demanded an audience. Duncan had been present both times, of course, but the king had definitely wanted to talk to Gwyn as well.

And she'd known him, marked the resemblance on sight? "I look like him?" Alistair asked. "Like Cailan, I mean. Really?" Without his leave, his hand went up to trace his jaw, his nose. He saw his face in the mirror every morning when he pulled out his razor to shave. It had never occurred to him that he might have inherited it from his father, share it with his half-brother. It made them more immediate, somehow. More real.

Gwyn put her hand on his arm. "Very much," she assured him.

"What do you know?" Alistair murmured. "I never thought I might look like him. Never really thought of King Cailan as my brother. It never really meant anything to me. I was inconvenient, you seeâ€"just a possible threat to his rule. It's why they kept me secret. Why I've never really talked about it to anyone, why I didn't tell you." He shot her an apologetic glance. Now he remembered, her expression when she'd asked him before if he knew who his father was. Allâ€"tight. Anxious. Worried. He'd thought it was sympathy before. Thought she was just being kind. She was kind, in fact, kinder than anyone might expect, kinder than her manner would suggest sometimes. But that was when she'd guessed, wasn't it? She'd known right then.

He tried to explain. "Everyone who knew either resented me for it or they coddled meâ€"even Duncan kept me out of the fighting because of it."

She frowned then, and her grip on his arm tightened, catching his attention. He looked at her. "Duncan didn't keep you out of the fighting," she told him, hazel eyes earnest. "Remember? It was the king who ordered you back from the battle at Ostagar. That was the other thing that made me think maybeâ€"it was like your appearance: it didn't really register until after you told me how the arl had raised you; it was just something that had been bothering me. But afterward, it made me almost certain."

\_This is by the king's direct order, Alistair\_, Duncan had said. But he'd never thoughtâ€" "No," Alistair said. He stepped back, shaking Gwyn off. It couldn't be.

But Gwyn refused to let it go. "I wondered that day why the king asked for you specifically, by name. I understood why he wanted Grey Wardens to see to the beacon, of course. Even why he wanted me to go. I'd just completed the Joining that day, after all. But why not send me alone? Or with any other random Grey Warden? Why send you specifically? But if the king knew you were his half-brother, the last of the Theirin lineâ€"

Why was there suddenly not enough air to breathe? They were outside, for Andraste's sake! But it was like he was gasping. He was all lightheaded. There was no way. Alistair tried to explain. "Impossible. I have no illusions about my status, Gwyn. It's always been made very clear that I'm a commoner and now a Gray Warden and in no way in line for the throne."

He had to get out of here. It was just too much, that Cailan might have held him back at Ostagar becauseâ€|no. Alistair started to turn away, to head back for the others. Gwyn cut him off with a single word. "Alistair."

That was all it took. Just one word. Just his name and he stopped in his tracks just like she had pierced a tendon with one of her enchanted ice arrows. Alistair clenched his fists at his side, but he turned around to face her. At least he could say she didn't look happy about what she was saying now. She looked about as tortured as he felt at what she was going to have to ask him to do, what she was going to have to ask him to be. It didn't really help him much. Maker, he didn't want to be king.

Gwyn swallowed. She shrank as if by speaking she were plunging a knife right into him. "You 'were a possible threat to Cailan's rule,'" she said, reminding him of his own words, gently, as gently as she could. Alistair wondered if he wouldn't have preferred her callousness, just now. Her kindness wouldn't keep her from ruining everything he'd ever hoped for himself. "You can't be that and be a commoner, too. It doesn't work like that."

Alistair tried to explain one more time. "No, if there's an heir to be found, it's probably Arl Eamon himself. He's Cailan's uncle, and more importantly, very popular with the people. Maybe Cailan was trying to keep me safe at Ostagar," he conceded. "From everything I've heard of him, he was a good man, but let's not read more into this than there is. I'm a bastard. Bastards can't inherit."

Gwyn sighed, but Alistair could tell already it wasn't any good. "They're not supposed to inherit," she qualified. "They usually don't. If Cailan had had a child, or even named Arl Eamon his successor in the event of his deathâ€"Andraste's teeth, if he'd named Anora his successor, the question probably wouldn't even come up for discussion. But he died without an heir, and you're the last of the bloodline.

"Eamon's claim is by marriage." Maker, but she was relentless. But right. She was right with every word, and Alistair hated her for it. "No stronger than Anora or Loghain's, though I'll grant you Eamon is a better option than they are. No, Alistair. You've been honest with me at last. I'll do the same for you. You have the strongest, surest claim to the throne of Ferelden, bastard or no, and even if you don't want itâ€"

"I don't!" Alistair almost shouted.

Gwyn hissed in a breath, and looking at her, Alistair realized she was close to tears, nearly as terrified as he was. She'd been a lady, before. Almost royalty. She knew just what this meant, but she stepped up anyway, until there was less than a foot separating them. She looked up into his eyes, as serious as he'd ever seen her, desperate for him to listen. "\_Even if you don't want it,\_" from now on, there will always be those that wish you to sit there regardless, and will act to seat you there, for power or tradition or what have you. It's why I hoped for your sake I was wrong about this. It will get out, Alistair. Things like this always do, and you are the heir to the throne. The only legitimate one we've got.

"I'm not asking you to do anything about it right now," she said. "We've the Blight to contend with. But think about it. There will come a time when you'll either have to make a decision about this, or have the decision made for you. In any event, I promise you this: you will have my support, Alistair, and my protection. A Cousland does her duty."

Alistair looked down at Gwyn Cousland. She had to be a Cousland, didn't she? His own ready-made knight. It had been bred into her. Respect for the crown, for king and country, above all else. It didn't matter what he wanted. Didn't even matter what \_she\_ wanted. What she was telling him right now was that from here on out, he was the future king of Ferelden to her. Or a possible future king of Ferelden, anyway. It didn't matter. His father's blood would follow him if he fled to the Anderfells.

"Duty," Alistair repeated, bitterly. "That's why I've never talked about this before with anyone that didn't already know, you know. They always treat me differently. The bastard prince, instead of justâ€¦Alistair. My father's blood has always cast a shadow over everything I do."

"And always will," Gwyn murmured sadly. "You are a prince, Alistair. You can't avoid it. I can't avoid it. But it doesn't have to mean that I am any less your friend, or that I am protecting you any less for your own sake than that of who your father and brother were. On the contrary, our friendship will make me that much more the eager to do my duty."

Alistair groaned. "If you must." She was only looking out for him, he knew, the same as she always did in battle, cutting down the enemy coming up upon his flank, piercing the archer on the hill with her arrow before his could find Alistair's heart. And at least she was being honest with him. He supposed if someone had to treat him like a potential heir to the throne, he was glad it was her. She'd suspected for over a fortnight, anyway, and she hadn't let him off his chores in the camp or kept him back from danger or anything. She respected he knew how to take care of himself. "Can we justâ€¦not think about it now, though? Between us, and in front of the others, can we just go back to pretending I'm someâ€¦nobody who was just too lucky to die with the rest of the Grey Wardens?"

Gwyn reached out to squeeze his hand. "Nobody's a nobody," she whispered. "Even before I guessed, you were never such to me, Alistair. I would not wish to share this duty of stopping the Blight with any other. I would not trust it to any other. I feel I am the

lucky one, to have you with me."

Alistair shook his head. He was a bastard, a boy, a silly fool who spouted nonsense about dogs and \_cheese\_ at her, and this beautiful, amazing, \_scarily\_ clever woman, almost a princess, thought \_she\_ was the lucky one to be standing by \_his\_ side. "Iâ€¦feel very unworthy of that," he said. He squeezed her hand once in return, and then let go.

Alistair didn't know the first thing about being king. All his life, he'd been told he never would be. He didn't want to be. But if he had someone like Gwyn Cousland on his side? Well. That had to count for something, right?

He walked back toward Wynne and Sten. Both of them looked very curious as to what he'd been discussing with Gwyn so earnestly. He'd have to tell them, too, he realized. He'd have to tell all of them.

Alistair almost groaned. Maker, she really was right, wasn't she? It would get out. There was no going back now, was there?

Later. Later. First things first. For now, he didn't have to be king. He knew Gwyn would be watching him, from here on out, \_protecting\_ him, for Andraste's sake, but for now, the only thing his duty dictated \_he\_ do was walk down the hill to Redcliffe. Thank the Maker for small mercies, anyway.

## 5. Shayna and Calenhad

**\*\*Disclaimer: Rights to Bioware.\*\***

**\*\*Chronology: In the story, after the Circle Tower, recruiting Shale, and defeating the demon at Redcliffe, but before the Urn of Sacred Ashes, Paragon of Her Kind, or Nature of the Beast. In the Alistair-romance, after the rose and the kiss, but before the first (k)night.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>Shayna and Calenhad<p>

Ever since Leliana had confessed to them all that she had once been a bard, it had not been uncommon for the party to ask her for a song or a tale when they made camp at night. Her stories and songs helped while away the hours, made the fire glow the brighter, brought the companions closer, and made the darkspawn seem further away.

One night, however, shortly after they had left Redcliffe to head toward Denerim to seek out Genetivi and pick up the trail of the Urn of Sacred Ashes, when Alistair and Zevran had taken up the call for Leliana to regale the party with a tale, Leliana laughed. "And am I the only one that has a tale to tell?" she asked. "Surely not! I am certain Morrigan could tell us tales from the Wilds. Or Shale? A comic tale of the villagers you observed for so long, hmm? Zevran, what of Antiva? I am certain you have many anecdotes of life in Antiva City, yes?"

"I very much doubt I have anything to tell that our company would

wish to hear," Morrigan scowled. She had drawn near, anticipating Leliana's tale, but now she withdrew to her tent at the very edge of the camp once more.

"You would hear a tale of the prostitutes and politicians in my Antiva City?" Zevran asked. "Perhaps I might give it a go, if that is truly what you wish."

"I'll go," Gwyn offered. She poked the fire with a stick. Sparks flew up into the night.

Everyone in the camp perked up with interest. Sandal scooted closer to the fire. Sten's head turned. "Yes, let us hear what it has to say," Shale said.

"Ooh, our fearless leader will play the minstrel tonight. This should be good," Alistair said, rubbing his hands together in faux anticipation.

Gwyn swallowed. She licked her lips, and began. Leliana smiled behind her hand. Adorable, how the poor thing was so nervous! It would be amusing to see how the former noblewoman and Grey Warden did at tale-telling.

"It is well known, of course, that Calenhad the Great was the first to unite Ferelden under one banner," she said. "The third son of a mere merchant, Calenhad rose to greatness and became Ferelden's first king by the strength of his arm, but more, by the strength of his honor. It was Calenhad's honor that made him his allies, among them the fierce and brave Lady Shayna of the lowlands. Like many others, Shayna swore her loyalty to Calenhad for love of his goodness, and she vowed to follow his banner and fight at his side for as long as they both should live. 'Andraste as my witness,' said she, 'If by my life or death I can serve you, my king, so let it be.'"

Gwyn paused, and Leliana, watching, noticed she actually trembled, as if her own passionate rendition of the legend had frightened her in some way. Nonetheless, she had captured everyone in the camp at the very opening of her tale. Even Cavall had dropped his head to his paws, eyes riveted upon his mistress.

Gwyn continued, "Though Calenhad and his lady wife—Mairyn, the daughter of Myrddin's—piety and belief in Andraste and the Chantry won over the allegiance of many in Ferelden who before had been ambivalent, it was with the strength of Lady Shayna that Calenhad faced all his foes. For years they battled side by side, and there was great love and trust between them. At last, only Simeon, Teyrn of Denerim remained to stand against Calenhad, but his armies could blacken the horizon with their might. All would have been lost, but for the charisma and brilliance of Calenhad, who at the last persuaded both the Circle of Magi and the dwarven Ash Warriors to lend him aid, and at the Battle of White Valley, Calenhad met Simeon's forces to unite Ferelden.

"The battle was long, and bloody. The magics of the mages lit the sky for miles around, and the valley rang with the clash of iron and steel, and the cries of dying men. In the heat of combat, Calenhad engaged with Teyrn Simeon, but he slipped in the blood and mud upon the field of battle. Simeon raised his greatsword above his head to strike down the young claimant to the throne, but Lady Shayna,

fighting nearby, saw her lord in danger. With a cry, Shayna threw her body between Simeon and Calenhad, and Simeon's sword rent her armor and bit deep into her side, inflicting a terrible wound. Simeon shouted his triumph to the skies, and so he did not see Shayna bringing her shining silver dagger up, even as she fell, right through the gap between his breastplate and armguard, and all the way to his heart. Simeon fell beside Shayna on that battlefield, but he did not rise."

Gwyn took a deep breath. The words were pouring out of her now, like something outside of herself was drawing them from her, out into the open air. It was like that sometimes, when a tale lay especially close to a bard's heart. This tale of Shayna and Calenhad lay very close to Gwyn's heart tonight, and Leliana felt a danger in it, like a knife's edge that was cutting the teller, even though Gwyn could not help but tell it. She was very good, Leliana observed. Almost good enough to make a girl jealous, in fact. Clearly this was not the first time she had spun a tale for the entertainment of an evening. But it wouldn't be, Leliana reflected, with sudden remorse. Of course as a teyrn's daughter many bards and minstrels would have come to Gwyn's home during childhood, and it would not have been untraditional for them to ask for Gwyn's aid in the telling, as a compliment to her father's house.

"Calenhad was crowned king at last," Gwyn said, "With Mairyn his queen, and the people of Ferelden rejoiced. But even as Calenhad spread the ways of the Chantry through the land, established trade with other lands, and began a bright new age in Ferelden, he tarried long by Lady Shayna's bedside, personally tending to her wound and helping his most loyal friend to regain her strength.

"When Shayna had healed, however, Calenhad was obliged to return fully to the duties of peace. What was his companion in war to do? At Calenhad's desire, Shayna lingered at court, but it pierced her soul to watch as he was drawn ever further away from her, to see to his supplicants, to establish trade agreements with other states, to fulfill his duties to wife and arls, while she languished.

"For Shayna secretly loved her young king," Gwyn whispered. Now she lowered her voice, as if confiding a secret. It was masterfully done, but Leliana also saw how Gwyn clasped her hands in front of her, tighter than a clamshell. She was trembling so now that it was necessary, to keep her voice strong, and Leliana wondered what other secrets Gwyn was telling this night. "And how could she not? True, his beauty was such as might take any woman's breath away, with his long, well-formed limbs, fair hair, and open smile, but to Shayna, Calenhad's goodness seemed to shine like the sun. His quick wit and sharp tongue had chased away her worries and brought laughter to her darkest days. They had passed together through innumerable dangers, borne each other's burdens. Calenhad confided his fears in Shayna and he had held her through her long recovery, as she raged at her weakness, and wept for all she had lost. He had kept her strong. They had fought and killed and bled together. What intimacy, what devotion could compare to this?"

The camp sat spellbound. Yes, Leliana decided, she was definitely jealous. Just a little. But she was not, as well. For all of Gwyn's skill with words, she was not a professional bard. She did not know how to tell a story without making it her own, and while Gwyn's passion gave the old legend the poignancy to which her audience was

responding, Leliana doubted they knew how it was tearing Gwyn's heart, to bare her soul in this way, how brave she was being tonight. And how foolish. Leliana did not envy that nakedness of spirit. It was unquestionably a beautiful thing, but it had to be a terrible thing, too, to feel.

Gwyn's voice throbbed as she neared the climax of her story. "One fateful day, a witch, cloaked in shadows and secrecy, did come to the Lady Shayna. The witch claimed to know of Shayna's secret desire, and offered to her a love potion that would grant it to her, if only for one day. How did the witch know of Shayna's love? In truth, she was none other than Simeon's sister, who had seen from afar at the Battle of White Valley how eagerly Shayna had thrown herself under Simeon's blade to save her king, and from the action divined the feelings behind it. Now the sister of Simeon sought her vengeance, but Shayna, all unaware, and drowning in her sorrow and her yearning for Calenhad, gave into temptation, and took the potion.

"Shayna offered the potion to Calenhad that very night. Of course the king had no reason to suspect his dearest friend would offer him anything harmful, and he gladly accepted the cup from Shayna's hand, and fell under her spell. But that night, Shayna and Calenhad were discovered by the Queen Mairyn, and betrayed and brokenhearted, Mairyn fled Denerim to return to her father's side to tell Myrddin of the king's infidelity. Furious, Myrddin made known the king's faithlessness to his wife to all Ferelden, and he threatened to revoke his support of Calenhad and plunge the nation into war once more.

"Shayna was filled with blackest remorse. Well she knew that had it not been for the witch's potion, her dearest friend would never have thought to betray his beloved wife. She could not suffer the stain to Calenhad's honor, when the fault was hers, and hers alone. When she heard the end to which her actions had led, Shayna entered the court and knelt before the king's feet. In front of all the people, she confessed what she had done. She proclaimed Calenhad's blamelessness, proclaimed that it was only due to her use of forbidden magic that they had done what they had done. 'Let my life be forfeit,' said she, 'I have betrayed my king and so dishonored my oath.'

"But Calenhad stepped forth and raised the Lady Shayna to her feet. He forgave her, and refused to have her executed. This enraged Myrddin and the other nobles in the land still more. Myrddin martialled the arls, determined to kill Shayna for her treachery, and Calenhad for forgiving it, at the expense of Myrddin's daughter and Calenhad's own wife, the queen. It was not long before Ferelden stood on the brink of civil war once more.

"Though Calenhad had ordered her to stay back, Shayna disobeyed his orders. In a last effort to renew the peace, she went alone and unarmed to Mairyn to plead for peace. But she was discovered by Myrddin. In vain were her pleas with Mairyn's furious father. Myrddin slew Shayna on her knees.

"When Calenhad learned of Shayna's murder, his sorrow and anger were great indeed. He felt he could not let this slaying of his greatest friend and ally go unanswered, despite what she had done, and so with great reluctance, he challenged his father-in-law to a duel of honor. In this duel Myrddin was slain, and the outrage of the arls forced Calenhad to abdicate in favor of Mairyn's unborn son. This son

eventually became King Weylan I, but Calenhad disappeared, never to be heard from again."

Gwyn bowed her head at last, and fell silent. The silence stretched long, as the tale hung over the party, as all good tales did at their end. Then Gwyn stood. "Excuse me," she said, and walked away quickly into the wilderness outside the camp.

"A powerful tale," Wynne remarked. "And masterfully told. And yet it troubles me."

"I never understood that story," Alistair muttered. He threw a log on the fire. "Shayna had been with Calenhad all along. She was his closest companion. In the end, he chose her over his wife, even after she admitted what she'd done. If he loved her so much, why didn't he just marry Shayna instead of Mairyn and avoid all the trouble in the first place?"

"If things were that simple, my friend, many men would still be living today, but we would have far fewer stories," Zevran said.

Morrigan sniffed. "As I have heard it, Mairyn was the daughter of Calenhad's closest ally. An obvious choice, if he wished to secure his power. Who was this Shayna? When did he meet her? It could have been after he had already wed Mairyn."

Alistair grimaced, but Leliana nodded. "It is quite possible. The legend does not say. But it is the way of things, I am afraid. The hero must wed the lady, she of incomparable wisdom and beauty, with lovely white hands unscarred by any blade, face unchapped by wind and rain and care. Often it is that the warrior woman, she who presumed to fight and kill beside the men, must die before the tale is complete. Otherwise there is no order, or so the tales would have us believe. It is thus in the tale of Aveline from Orlais."

"Well I don't like it," Alistair said. "It's not fair. It's not right."

"Nor is life," Leliana replied, "And what are tales for, but to offer us a mirror in which to see ourselves? Gwyn did a wonderful job. I could not have done a better myself. But if it is a comfort to you, I do not believe she liked this tale any more than you, Alistair."

"It is all upset now, isn't it?" Shale observed. "Why did it pick this story, if another would have pleased it better?"

"Ah, but what other tale could a good Ferelden noblewoman have told to a camp of foreigners but the tale of the first king of Ferelden?" Leliana asked, smiling around at Morrigan, the Feddics, Sten, Shale, and Zevran. "Though mostâ€"most would have chosen to tell how Calenhad rose to power and first allied with Myrddin, the father of Mairyn his queen. That is a happier story. But perhaps Gwyn could not help but tell this tale. It is like that sometimes."

"What do you mean she couldn't help it?" Bodahn Feddic wanted to know. "Of course she could help what story she told."

Sten folded his arms. "There was more in the Warden's tale than entertainment."

Leliana regarded the qunari warrior. "Indeed," she agreed. "There always is, of course. Some hidden meaning, some learning the audience is meant to take away from the tale. Sometimes this meaning is for all. Sometimes, just for one. Sometimes, it is for the storyteller themselves, a way for them to speak the words they could not speak otherwise. The tale a storyteller chooses to tell, the details they add to it or leave out, say just as much as the tale itself."

But when Morrigan pursed her lips, and Wynne frowned in sudden worry, Leliana rose herself. "But I say too much. You are not minstrels. No doubt you are most uninterested in the art of storytelling. I think I shall retire. Zevran, you are on first watch tonight, yes?" The elf nodded. "Wake me when I must relieve you." She beat a hasty retreat back to her tent, but not before she noticed that sometime during the conversation, Alistair had gone.

\* \* \*

><p>Alistair found her about three quarters of a mile from the camp, a mile off the road, where the river had curved into a small wood, and the rocks had dammed part of it naturally into a clear, shallow pool that reflected the stars and the moon overhead. Gwyn sat on a boulder by the pool, her hand loosely on her longbow by her side. Prepared to protect herself from bandits or darkspawn, should they attack, or to kill any hare or deer that should venture across her path, food for their party. She was always prepared for any danger, never defenseless. It was one of the things that was so great about her.<p>

She heard him coming. Of course she did. A cat couldn't sneak up on Gwyn Cousland in a blizzard, but she didn't turn around. "Come to check on me?" she asked. "I'm fine, Alistair. Just a little embarrassed, I guess. I got a little carried away. I used to tell stories back home all the time. Father loved to hear me. I justâ€¦went with it, and before I knew it, I was saying way more than I meant to say in front of the entire camp. Or, you know, ever."

"The vow," Alistair said. "The dagger. All those things you added in about how Shayna felt about Calenhad." His ears were burning now. "They weren't a part of the original story. I don't think most of them realized. They aren't Ferelden, or not like we are. Sten and Leliana might have got it. At least, it was something they each said that made me realize."

"I was fairly obvious," Gwyn said. She gave a nervous laugh. "Though I don't think I realized until I'd added in Shayna's oath what I was doing. Then I figuredâ€¦I'd started. I might as well finish."

"\_'Andraste as my witness\_,'" Alistair remembered,

"\_'If by my life or death I can serve you, my king, so let it be\_,'" Gwyn confirmed. Now she turned around, and met Alistair's eyes.

"Really, Gwyn?" he asked. He reached for her hand, and she gave it to him, allowing him to help her down from the boulder.

"With a song in my heart and a smile on my lips," Gwyn replied. Her cheeks flamed in the moonlight, but she held Alistair's gaze bravely.

"How long?"

"Since the moment you confirmed what I suspected, that you were Maric's son and Cailan's brother," Gwyn answered. "Not because of that, but because of who you are. The goodness and loyalty and iron sense of duty I saw in you from the first."

Silently, Alistair raised Gwyn's hand to his lips, and he kissed her fingers. "I am far from a Calenhad, my brave Lady Shayna," he said. "I don't deserve such loyalty."

"As ever, you are blind to your own worth, and thus twice more worthy," Gwyn replied. "My loyalty is my own, to withhold or to give, as is my heart. Both," she smiled, but there was a sadness, a wariness in her eyes, "are yours, Alistair."

"Then why so sad, my lady?" Alistair asked. "You know I care about you more than anyone."

"Alistair," Gwyn whispered, "Calenhad doesn't get to be with Shayna. Not forever. He has to marry Mairyn. Once I could have been Mairyn for you, too. Perhaps. But Howe took that away when he killed my family. Grey Wardens can't hold a title. And you've told me enough about what we sacrifice with the Joining that I've begun to understand why."

"But isn't it the same for me, then? Wouldn't that mean a Grey Warden couldn't be king?" Alistair pointed out.

"It's different for you," Gwyn protested. "We've talked about this. They aren't going to let you off of it, and you'll be spectacular, Alistair. You will."

"Then if I can be a prince and a Grey Warden," Alistair said, making a face at the word 'prince,' "I don't see why you can't still be a teyrn's daughter, Gwyn Cousland. Now. Let's have no more nonsense." He kissed her once on the forehead, kissed her hands once more.

"As you wish, my king," Gwyn smiled, and he glared at her in mock reproach. She wasn't completely convinced, he could see. Neither was he, to tell the truth. If she was right, and it did get out who he was and someone did try to make him the king—Well. They would cross that bridge when they came to it. But he was determined they would cross it together. Another common-born Theirin king perhaps, another warrior woman who fought at his side, but he was not King Calenhad and she was not the Lady Shayna. Alistair knew Gwyn would never betray him, nor would he abandon the woman who had walked with him through every step of the Blight to languish and watch him love another. Not that he could ever imagine Gwyn doing anything as soppy as languishing. Definitely not her style. And Maker strike him down if he ever let her do anything like throwing herself under an attacking teyrn's blade for him or hurling herself upon the mercies of an angry, vengeful arl.

By my life or death, indeed!

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: \*\*\*\*Enjoy the Arthurian parallels. I certainly do. Even named the dog for them! It's what interested me in a fandom I'd probably otherwise leave well enough alone (Certainly not going to play the other two games in this series! Thedas is just too depressing!) Leave a review if you've got something to say.\*\*

\*\*Regards, \*\*

\*\*LMS\*\*

## 6. Intentions

\*\*Disclaimer: Dialogue you recognize is from the game. Otherwise, it's original, but you know the drill. All rights here disavowed.  
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\*\*Chronology: This camp is directly after the one in "Shayna and Calenhad." You may picture the companions camped by the Drakon River, just outside Denerim, before they go to seek Brother Genetivi to find the Urn of Sacred Ashes.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Intentions<p>

Gwyn plopped down next to Wynne, eyes closed in pleasure. "I worship at your feet," she said fervently. "These pancakes are a gift from the Maker Himself. Please, please teach me your wisdom. Or Alistair. You could teach him, too." She took another bite of flat cake Wynne had put together with two brace of rabbit, some herbs Morrigan had found, and some grain they had bought back in Redcliffe Village. It was nothing short of magical.

Wynne laughed. "You learn a thing or two when you've lived as long as I have," she said. "You are getting better, you know. The fish the other day was almost edible."

Gwyn chuckled ruefully. "I didn't think it was that bad, actually."

Wynne relented with a smile. "There now. It's hardly your fault. Of course you couldn't have been expected to learn to cook before you became a Gray Warden. You're having to learn as you go along. You might have some promise." She glanced across camp at Alistair. "Some people, on the other hand, never learn."

Gwyn chewed her dinner and swallowed. "You'd cut him to the quick. He tries so hard, too."

"And the last thing we'd want to do is hurt his feelings," Wynne said. This time, however, the teasing tone bit a little deeper, and Gwyn looked up. Wynne was looking at her pointedly. "I was very interested in that story you told the other night," she added. "Shayna and Calenhad. A traditional choice, perhaps, but very passionately rendered."

Gwyn laid down her fork. "Ah—"

"You're quite taken with each other, aren't you?"

Gwyn very much wished she hadn't already sat down. Standing, it would have been much easier to avoid the conversation. One joke and she could leave and go eat supper with someone else. Zevran or Leliana, perhaps. Now she was seated, standing would be an obvious retreat. "Um—I, er—"

She felt herself blushing. Andraste's teeth, where had her words gone? She could cut a man down three feet in five seconds with words alone. She'd moved grizzled old warriors to tears with her eloquence. By the Maker, she could convince hardened mercenaries to spend their fortunes buying candies for orphaned children, if the whim struck her, and now she was stuttering like a schoolgirl.

—It's the manner. She just reminds me so much of Gran, before she died. Right down to the disapproving glance that makes me feel shorter than a dwarf. —

"Even if you hadn't declared your love in story and song in front of us all, dear, it's hard not to notice the doe-eyed looks he gives you, especially when he thinks no one's watching. It's almost too sweet for my tastes, and I'm an old lady who should be making lace hearts and fuzzy blankets with animal motifs."

Gwyn endeavored to stave off the impending lecture with a joke. "Well, you did make that sweater for Sten. But you're hardly the average old lady."

"No, I won't be making socks with pom-poms for you any time soon, but that's hardly my point."

Her efforts for naught, Gwyn resigned herself to hearing Wynne out. She set her supper aside and sat up straight. "What is?"

"I've noticed your blossoming relationship," Wynne answered, "And I wanted to ask you where you thought it was going. Alistair is a fine lad, skilled in battle, but inexperienced when it comes to affairs of the heart. I would hate to see him get hurt."

"Never." The word was out before she could check it, fiercer and far more vehement than she wanted. Gwyn blushed again, but held Wynne's gaze. "I would \_never\_," she repeated.

Wynne sighed. She held out her hands, and Gwyn offered her hand with some reluctance. Wynne took it. "Oh, my girl, I know you would never intentionally hurt him, but there is great potential for tragedy here, for one or both of you. You know this as well as I. That, too, was in your tale.

"You are both Grey Wardens, and he is the son of a king. You have responsibilities which supersede your personal desires."

Gwyn snatched her hand back. "I know that. Don't you think I know that?" she demanded. Her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides. She looked into the fire and listed them, one by one. "The Blight first. Then Alistair. Not us; him. His safety, his future. Either he'll have to be king, or we'll have to get him out of Ferelden. In

both cases it'll be my duty to protect him. Then there's meâ€”my responsibilities to my house, my family. They're not gone, whatever the Wardens say. I have to find out if my brother is alive. I have to see Howe to justice for what he's done. And thenâ€”then I'll have to make a decision about the future of my family. If there even can be one."

Wynne's face had fallen. For all her talk about duty and responsibility, she didn't much like hearing Gwyn lay out how it dominated her life, did she? "You do see my point, then?"

"Of course I see your point!" Gwyn snapped. "There's a dozen, a hundred things in the way. I know that! I do!" She wrapped her arms around her torso and squeezed hard. "Me and Alistairâ€”I don't know what's going on, Wynne," she admitted. "I have no clue what it is we're doing. It's not like we can court as if I was still a lady living at Castle Cousland. I know that. It's justâ€”I like him," she whispered. "\_Like\_. It's hardly adequate."

Wynne shook her head. "Love is ultimately selfish," she said. "It demands that one be devoted to a single person, who may fully occupy one's mind and heart, to the exclusion of all else. A Grey Warden cannot afford to be selfish. You may be forced to make a choice between saving your love and saving everyone else, and then what would you do?"

Gwyn went still. Her fingers curled in the hem of her shirt. "You heard my story," she answered. "I'm planning out the strategy here. I'm organizing the army. So my first priority is to ensure we are never in the position where it's Alistair or everyone else. Basic chess. You lose the king, you've lost the game. So if things ever look that desperateâ€”Queen's sacrifice." She shrugged, just as if it wasn't her own life she was talking about sacrificing. She picked her plate back up, took a bite, and tried to forget about Wynne's eyes on her, wide, full of fear and pity, for all that Gwyn had told the old woman almost exactly what she knew she had to want to hear.

"You would do that? Sacrifice your life, to save his?"

Gwyn swallowed. "If I had to? In a second. Not just for him. For everyone. I've got no illusions, Wynne. I know Alistair's life is worth more than mine in this."

"Alistair might disagree with you."

Gwyn was silent. She took another bite. He could disagree all he wanted. It didn't change the facts.

Wynne peered at her. "You haven't told him."

"A Cousland does her duty," Gwyn told her, without answering the question Wynne had actually asked. She finished her meal and stared into the fire. "I'm hoping it isn't necessary, Wynne. But since you asked, if ever it wasâ€”yes. My life, for his, and for all the lives his will preserve and improve."

"Dear Maker, you really would cut out your heart and lay it at his feet if he asked, wouldn't you?" It wasn't really a question. "Before he asked. The moment you thought it was needed."

Gwyn's fingers curled around the edges of the plate. It was like being naked in the snow, laying everything out for someone else to see and judge like this. Maker, it \_hurt\_.

Wynne's eyes were bright with unshed tears. "You're soâ€|young. I was wrong," she said, then. "My dear girl, you are far from selfish, but don't you see how you will break his heart? Do you think Alistair could be indifferent if you made such a sacrifice for him? It would truly be to write the tale of Shayna and Calenhad all over again. You told us all: After Shayna was slain, Calenhad could no longer \_be\_ king. A man like Alistair does not love casually, and the first love is always the hardest."

Gwyn's fingers tightened, until she felt the edges of the plate pressing hard into the top of her palm, the fingers beginning to go numb as the flow of blood was cut off. "First?" she repeated.

Wynne looked at her with sympathy. "Yes, for Alistair as well. It's really quite obvious. Did you not know?"

Gwyn's breath came unsteady. "I didn't," she murmured. "I thoughtâ€" "She stood. "Thank you for your advice," she said. "Iâ€|I'll consider what you've said." She held out her hand for Wynne's plate, and went to do the washing. She hoped it would clear her head.

\* \* \*

><p>Though she'd taken the dinnerware of all the company, and the griddle and knives as well, and refused offers of assistance from both Zevran and Leliana, Gwyn hadn't had time enough to clear her head with the washing.<p>

Wynne was right. She had not considered what she was about with Alistair nearly as thoroughly as she ought. His father had been King Maric, which meant that in the long term, there was almost certainly no future for them. Not only would her duty to Maric's son, to Cailan's brother always have to come before their friendship, their love, whether or not he actually became king, there was her own duty to consider as well. Alistair Theirin could never father heirs for the Cousland line. If Fergus was dead, or if he never remarried, to stay with Alistair as king or in exile would be to destroy her line with her own hand. Even Alistair's bastard children would always be Theirins before all else. Alistair himself was walking, talking proof of that much.

But if there was no future for them, what in Andraste's name had she been doing?

She had allowed him to comfort her when she was weak. He had given her a gift, one obviously meant to convey his intentions to court her. She had accepted. She had given him her hand, let him kiss it, kiss her on the forehead. Not once, but many times. She had given him her lips. \_Not\_ many times, but more than once, so she could hardly write it off as a mistake, a solitary moment of weakness. No, she had wanted it.

What did she intend? Her mother would have said her behavior was only appropriate to a lady with her betrothed. She and Alistair were hardly betrothed. On the other hand, her brother and father had not

been so conservative. \_Let her break a few hearts while she can, my love, \_her father had laughed once. \_Keep the young men on their toes! \_Fergus had always teased her about her suitors, whether she'd been sneaking kisses behind the stables again. Mostly because he knew she never had. But neither her father nor Fergus would approve of her fumbling around blind like this, without a thought to the future. \_It isn't fair, pup, \_her father would say. \_To the lad or to you. \_And she could hear Fergus, now, more blunt. \_Bed him if you want, Gwyn. Just make sure it's what \_you\_ want. Don't give yourself away for nothing. \_

She had been willing to do so, she realized. Aware that if she needed to do so, she would die for him in a heartbeat, that these might be her last days, Gwyn had been letting Alistair take the lead, almost \_because\_ she'd been a noble. She'd been her mother's daughter, unwilling to grant her favors where her suitors were unwilling to accept her on her terms, unwilling to compromise. She knew her ideas of love, of lovemaking, had been skewed by her upbringing, where love was the brass ring and lovemaking a line in a contract. Things were different for ordinary citizens, for soldiers. She'd looked to Alistair to show her, to help her to make the most of the time, in case fate determined they wouldn't have much of it.

Knowing this could be a first love for him as well changed things. Loving him and sacrificing her life to save his was one thing. Sacrificing \_his\_ love was quite another. If Alistair had been so patient, so courteous, not only out of respect for her, or some misplaced sense of social inequality, but because each moment between them was as new and as sacred for him as it was for her—Calen had spent months after Shayna was wounded, tending her, and when she'd been slain, he had thrown away the kingdom he had worked so hard for in a \_moment\_, for her love.

If Alistair would be unable to let her go if it proved necessary, if she had inadvertently become as important as Alistair in securing the future of Ferelden and she would have to be even more careful of her safety in any future plans to stop the Blight, for his sake, she had to know now.

She took the dinnerware to the chest where they stored the kit. The Feddics carried it during the days in their wagon. By now she trusted them not to steal it, trusted they would either share their camp at night, or Bodahn would tell her when he intended to break away from their company. She understood why he had not—they had established a mutually beneficial trading relationship. Gwyn provided Bodahn with protection on the road, passage to all corners of Ferelden and thus reliable, steady access to an influx of goods, not only the extra supplies the company picked up in their travels, but also the goods he was able to trade for in cities and villages all across the land. He was turning quite a profit these days, and in return, he was able to pay Gwyn well for the supplies she procured for him, discounted access to his own changing stock and Sandal's enchanting abilities, and the services of his mules and cart in moving their camp every day.

Gwyn closed the chest, stood, and looked at Alistair. He looked back at her, and she motioned for him to follow her, away from the camp and into the woods.

"Am I in trouble?" he joked. "You and Wynne looked like you were

having a very serious conversation over supper earlier. I caught her looking at me once or twice."

"Not in trouble," Gwyn assured him. "But she did say something that made me think. Alistair, you were raised in the Chantry. Have you neverâ€" "

Alistair fell into step with her. "Never what? Had a good pair of shoes?"

It hadn't occurred to her, walking over here, how very awkward this conversation would be. Gwyn's face flamed, and she kicked at the dirt. "You know what I mean!" she grumbled.

"I'm not sure I do. Have I neverâ€" seen a basilisk? Ate jellied ham? Have I never licked a lamppost in winter?" He was enjoying this, Gwyn fumed.

"Now you're making fun of me," she accused him.

Alistair laughed at her. "Make fun of you, dear lady? Perish the thought! Well, tell me: Have you ever \_licked a lamppost in winter\_?"

He cocked his eyebrows at her, waiting. So he \_did\_ know what she meant. Gwyn shifted uneasily. "What do you think?" she answered, angry because she felt so foolish. "\_No\_. I've neverâ€" \_licked a lamppost in winter." \_

Alistair resumed their walk. "Good. I hear it's quite painful. I remember one of the younger initiates did it on a dare, once, and there was pointing and laughingâ€" oh, the humanity." He swallowed, licked his lips, and looked sideways at her. "I, myself, have also never done \_it\_," he admitted. "That. Not that I haven't thought about it, of course, butâ€" "

Gwyn sighed. "You never had the opportunity. My mother would have killed me," she explained, on her own behalf.

"Nor is living in the Chantry exactly a life for rambunctious boys," Alistair laughed, a little nervous now. "They taught me to be a gentleman, especially in the presence of beautiful women such as yourself. That's not so bad, is it?"

He was afraid she would judge him, or worse, laugh. But Gwyn only met his gaze. "Not unless it's bad my mother taught me to be a lady," she answered. "So. \_Beautiful\_, is it?"

"Of course you're beautiful, Gwyn, and you know it," Alistair accused her, with a smile in his voice. "You're ravishing, resourceful, and all those other things you'd probably hurt me for not saying."

Gwyn laughed, but shook her head. "Never," she murmured again. "Never." She reached out, caught his hand, and brought it once to her lips. He wound his arm around her, pulled her to his side, and kissed her forehead.

"Nor would I ever hurt you, my lady," he promised.

"Maker, this complicates things." Gwyn muttered. Alistair stopped.

She hastened to reassure him. "Not that you'reâ€"you know. I have no idea what I'm doing, either. That it matters. It's more important now. That's the complicated bit."

Alistair looked down at her, puzzled, a bit disapproving. "You'd rather it wasn't? I suppose we could find a bush somewhere, if you really just wanted to get things over with."

"No, that's not what Iâ€"that is, of course I'm willing to share a bed with you at some point. If you want."

Alistair laughed. "Oh, I want," he said under his breath. He kissed her forehead again, then released her carefully.

"It would just be easier if it didn't matter so much, to both of us," Gwyn told him. "Alistair, there's a very good chance one or both of us will die in this Blight, or in whatever happens next. It's harder, to give yourself to someone like that, knowingâ€"knowing you might not get to keep themâ€"knowing how much they'll hurt if they can't keep you. I could make that choice for myself, but to make it for you?" She shook her head.

"You don't think we'll both survive this? That we'll stay together?"

Gwyn squirmed. "We can't be sure of that," she said at last. "We'll do our best to make sure we both get out alive, of course, but there can be no guarantees."

"And after, if we do?" Alistair challenged her.

Gwyn sighed, walking ahead of him. "I will always be your friend, Alistair. You will always have my support, no matter what. I promised you that. But we don't know what's going to happen."

"You mean if I have to be king."

"Or if Fergus is dead or any number of other things comes to pass," Gwyn protested. "Alistair, we can't just think about us, what you and I might want. We have responsibilities, both of us. If you can't accept that someday, I may have to decide between being your knight or your lover, and that if that happens, I will do my duty, then maybe it's best this never goes any further."

"We can plan for that," Alistair said, waving a hand. "You forget, Gwyn, you're not just protecting me. I'm protecting you, too. A lot of people are protecting you. Actually, in an out-and-out fight I do rather well, you know. This sword isn't just for show."

Gwyn smiled. "At close range and face-to-face, I daresay on the average you fare quite a bit better than I do. Far be it from me to deny it. It's my job to stop our enemies from getting that close, however."

"And mine to keep them from you, if they somehow survive your storm of arrows, your assassins and your mages and what have you," Alistair returned. "I'm not afraid we'll die, Gwyn. We work well together. We protect one another, for the most part. There are some cuts and bruises here and there, but we can handle those. I have faith in us. You should, too," he added. "I don't ever think you'll have to throw

yourself beneath Simeon's blade\_ to save my life. The other does concern me. You mentioned your brother. What if the choice is between being Gwyn Cousland and being my lover?" He made a face. "Maker, that's strange to say. My \_lover\_."

Gwyn hesitated. Her step slowed. People often underestimated Alistair, she thought. He hid behind his jokes and clownishness. He was young, and his different upbringing meant that he was sometimes ignorant of things she had known all her life, but he was no fool, and it was foolish ever to think so or treat him thus, which was just further proof that one thing Gwyn could be certain Morrigan had never lied about was her lack of experience with the world.

She stalled. "You're very perceptive tonight."

"I have my moments. Don't tell anyone. I do have a reputation to uphold." Alistair said breezily, but he was watching her. "Gwyn?"

Gwyn twisted her hands in front of her. "I don't know," she whispered finally. "Your lover or your knight, that's easy. My duty's clear. But the other? I justâ€¦don't know."

Alistair's eyes kindled in the glowing gloom. He stopped, faced her. "So you would consider it?" he asked. "Me, over your duty to your family? The future of the Couslands? You'd really do that?"

"I don't know," Gwyn repeated. "Maybe. Youâ€¦it wasn't part of the plan. None of this was. But things are different now. I'm not just Gwyn Cousland anymore. I'm a Grey Warden, your friend, in \_whatever\_ this is with us, and maybe I'm stupid, a silly girl willing to throw everything away for her first love" she stopped, looked down, cheeks flaming in the dusk.

"Gwyn," that was all he said. Just her name, but with so much gratitude, so much tenderness in the way he said it, in his eyes, that she could hardly stand it. He brought his hand up to touch her cheek, softly, so softly, like the breath of a newborn colt. Gwyn closed her eyes, and tilted her head up to meet his lips. They were warm, sure against hers, and moved with much more confidence than they had in their first efforts at this a few weeks ago. That first kiss had touched her heart then with its sweetness, but \_this\_ left her knees trembling as if they'd turned to jelly, and set a liquid fire in her belly that stole the breath from her lungs. \_This\_ sweetness pierced her soul, and it was so akin to pain Gwyn let out a soft cry and clutched Alistair's collar, whether to pull him closer or just to keep herself standing, she didn't know.

Alistair rested his forehead against hers, running his thumb now over her cheek, her nose, her swollen, hungry lips. "Maybe you are a silly girl," he whispered. "But at least you can have confidence in knowing I'm just as silly and besotted as you are, right?"

"Am I? Am I really \_besotted\_?" Gwyn asked, dazed.

Alistair leaned down and kissed her again. "I'm afraid you are," he told her. "I'm \_really\_ sorry about that, by the way, except you know I'm not, actually. Not at all."

"You're a bad man."

"Guilty as charged," Alistair laughed. He looked down at her seriously then. "When it happens for us, Gwyn, and it willâ€"that is, I hope it willâ€"

"Oh, it will," Gwyn assured him.

Alistair flushed then, and his ears turned red. "When it happens, I want you to know that. That this is new territory for me, too. Hm. In more ways than one." He pulled back, but Gwyn laced her arm through his as they turned to head back toward the camp.

"We'll chart it together," she promised.

## 7. Yours

**\*\*Disclaimer:** I don't own these characters. I'm just playing with this plot.\*\*

**\*\*Chronology:** A few weeks after "Intentions," in the west of Ferelden, en route to the village of Haven.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Yours<p>

"All right. I guess I really don't know how to ask you this."

Gwyn put away the last of the dried bear from the attack at the old battlefield last week. Feeding eight bodies every dayâ€"eleven with the Feddics and the Circle liaison- was no joke. It was a good thing Shale didn't eat. She'd have to go with Leliana, Sten, and Morrigan soon for more food. See if they could forage some mushrooms, herbs, tree bark. Find some fish in the nearby lake. Take a deer, maybe, a hare or a wild goose. Winter was coming. Feeding everyone was just going to get harder and harder. They should probably head up to Orzammar next, Gwyn reflected, after they'd resolved the situation at Redcliffe one way or another. The dwarves would at least have more food readily available for purchase.

Gwyn tucked an errant strand of her hair behind her ear and stood, facing Alistair. "Ask me what?"

Alistair opened his mouth and closed it again. He seemed flushed in the firelight, she noticed. His hands came up to rake through his hair, and he paced in a little circle. "Oh, how do I say this," he muttered. "You'd think it would be easier, but every time I'm around you, I feel as if my head's about to explode. Iâ€"I can't think straight."

Gwyn stared at him. She was starting to feel concerned. "Alistair, you can ask me anything. You know that," she told him.

"Here's the thing," he explained. "Being near you makes me crazy, but if you ask me what I want, you're there, every time. I can't imagine being without you. Not ever." He seemed to give up working his way up to it then, and confessed, "I don't know how to say this another way. I want to spend the night with you. Here, in the camp. Maybe this is too fast, I don't know, butâ€"I know what I feel."

Oh. \_Oh\_. Gwyn glanced around the camp, hyperaware all at once of who all might be listening, watching. Nights came too soon now for her to tell who was; they were standing too far from the fire, in the shadows near their respective tents. Some might have already bedded down. Who had first watch? Sten?

Gwyn felt her face flaming like a sunrise. She twisted her hands in front of her. "Alistair, are you sure?"

"I wanted to wait for the perfect time, the perfect place," Alistair told her. "But when will it ever be perfect? If things were, we wouldn't even have met. We sort ofâ€¦ stumbled into one another, and despite this being the least perfect time, I still found myself falling for you in between all the fighting and everything else. I really don't want to wait anymore. I'veâ€¦ I've never done this before."

"Neither have I!" Gwyn reminded him. She tried to hide her blushing cheeks with her hands as she thought of the thin tent walls, how sounds would carry across the camp. What embarrassed her most was how she didn't even care.

"Is this too fast?" Alistair wanted to know. "I shouldn't have asked, should I?"

"No, it's fine," Gwyn promised him. "More than fine. I justâ€¦" Alistair, a hundred things could happen." But she was already doing the arithmetic in her head to see if tonight would be safe, if they could lie together without fear of making a child she would have to carry in the middle of a Blight. Maker, even if it wasn't, she just bet Morrigan knew a few spells or potionsâ€¦

Andraste's teeth, wouldn't her mother have killed her! To take a man to bed like this, not her husband nor her betrothed, nor anyone that was ever likely to be. Maric's bastard, the probable heir to the throne, when the murders of Oren and Oriana had taken them far past the place where she would make a good queen, even discounting the taint in her blood that meant she'd be lucky to see fifty.

Gwyn's heart raced, pounding an erratic tattoo against her ribs. "Is this really what you want?" \_When we might not last? \_

"I want it to be with you," Alistair confirmed. Now that he'd got it out, he sounded certain. "While we have the chance. In caseâ€¦"

Gwyn understood. He felt as she did. He wanted this \_because \_they might not last. If a darkspawn's blade or the Archdemon's breath took one or both of them, if they survived, but the crown or her duty to her family tore them apart, they could go into the void with no regrets. They could face the years ahead knowing that in the time they had spent together, they had each given all the love they could. Given everything.

She smiled slowly. "Don't say it," she whispered. "There's no need." She reached out and took both his hands, and brought them to her lips. "Let us waste no more time, then. Take this night, and as many as it pleases the Maker to grant us." Alistair turned his hands in hers to stroke her chin. He stepped close, and kissed her once, softly.

"Thank you," he murmured against her lips.

"This is yours," Gwyn replied simply. "Whatever happens, this will always be yours, and so will a part of me." She smiled again then, and laced her finger through Alistair's to lead him to her tent.

\* \* \*

><p>Gwyn lay in her lover's arms later, sore and exhausted but so full she had no words.<p>

Alistair broke the silence. "You know, according to all the sisters at the monastery, I should have been struck by lightning by now." He rubbed up and down her arms, leaned forward, planted a soft kiss on Gwyn's hot, sweaty cheek.

She laughed against his mouth. "It could still happen, you know."

"True, but if it happens afterward it's hardly an effective deterrent, is it?" Alistair punctuated his question with a tickle to her sides, and Gwyn squealed and slapped at him, before leaning back into him again and closing her eyes.

"Bring on the lightning bolts, I say," she murmured sleepily. "I can die happy."

"The other members of our little group are going to talk, you know," Alistair told her. "They do that." Gwyn peered at the tent flap. With the lantern on inside the tent, their silhouettes and what they'd been doing had probably been perfectly visible to everyone else in the camp, and the canvas walls were hardly soundproof. She couldn't bring herself to give a damn.

"If it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me. I'm not ashamed of us, Alistair."

She could feel Alistair's smile against her cheek, hear it in the warmth of his voice. He kissed her again. "So. What happens now?"

"For all we feel, for all we've done here, nothing has changed," Gwyn whispered, and it pierced her heart like a knife, to say so. "There's still the Blight. You're still Maric's son. So many things could happen to you, to me. To us. Butâ€|if you wish, we can face those things side by side. Togetherâ€|in \_all\_ things."

"That's what I want," Alistair promised her. "I love you, you know. Did I tell you that? Well, it won't kill you to hear it again, will it?"

Gwyn twisted in Alistair's arms so they were face to face again. "As a matter of fact you hadn't told me that," she answered, with mock sternness. Then she laughed and kissed his nose. "But I knew. And do you know what?" She kissed his mouth, taking her time. "I love you, too," she whispered.

**\*\*Disclaimer: Disclaimed. BAM!\*\***

**\*\*Chronology: After the Quest for the Urn of Sacred Ashes, during and after the interview where Eamon sets forth his plan to put Alistair forward as king at the Landsmeet.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>An Understanding<p>

Eamon couldn't get a read on young Cousland. He glanced at his brother. Teagan had some familiarity with the young woman; they'd often been visiting Denerim at the same time in her youth. Then he'd fought beside her here in the village as well, while Eamon had been ill. Eamon knew his brother had great respect for Gwyn Cousland. Once or twice, a couple years ago, Teagan had even said a word or two to Eamon of a personal admiration for the girl. She'd been little more than a child then, not eighteen years old.

She had come of age in battle and hardship, and Gwyn Cousland was fully formed now. She was taller than many women, lean and strong and healthy, with dark hair well-brushed and glossy for all its boyish length, and quite remarkable flashing hazel eyes. She was lovely, yes, but undeniably dangerous as well.

Gwyn Cousland was a powerful woman. Eamon knew she would be a crucial voice in the Landsmeet. Potentially the last of her line and thus the last legitimate claimant to the teyrnir of Highever, Gwyn Cousland was also one of only two remaining Gray Wardens in Ferelden, one of the only two that could defeat the Archdemon and end the Blight. Her voice could potentially sway all Ferelden one direction or another, but Eamon could not shake the feeling that for all young Cousland had saved his life, his family, and his holding to ally with him against the Blight, she considered herself no friend to him.

The chill coming off of her was like the bite of the southern winter wind. She said little as Eamon told her his plan to put Alistair forward as king. Though she asked many questions, she would not tell him what she thought of the scheme, whether she approved or not, but all the time, she stood, legs shoulder width apart, arms folded, eyes hard as stone, between Eamon and in front of Alistair, undeniably telling him with her body what he already suspected: '\_This will not go through without me.'\_

She couldn't be much older than Alistair herself, but Eamon saw in Gwyn Cousland an invaluable ally, but also a potentially formidable opponent. Certainly she had seen more of Alistair lately than he had, and traveling companions and comrades-at-arms sometimes formed strong bonds, not even considering the hardships they had faced together as the last two Gray Wardens remaining to combat the Blight. Her influence at this point with Alistair might be greater than his own. Almost certainly was, in fact, Eamon thought with a pang, remembering the last time he had seen the boy. Although it had never been his intention, he knew he had hurt Alistair greatly, sending him away.

When their counsel ended, Teagan and Alistair left the hall. Alistair was not pleased with their course of action, though if Eamon knew the boy, he would come around in time. But Cousland remained with Eamon.

For a moment, she just stood, gazing at him, arms folded in that combative stance. Eamon had offered her a chance to wash and a change of clothes before their audience, but though she had accepted the former, she had declined the latter. She stood before him in her battle leathers, armed with a longbow many men would not be able to draw, and a dagger and what looked to be an heirloom longsword in an odd double sheath on her hip. For all that, she held herself like the teyrn's daughter she was, like a princess.

"I think we should talk, you and I," she said. The words were quiet, but her hard, clear tone carried nevertheless, echoing through the hall. "You understand the sacrifice Alistair will be making, pursuing the course you plan? His life will never be his own again."

Eamon gestured to a nearby table and chairs, and Gwyn followed him over. They sat down together. "I had hoped to avoid this," Eamon told her, "But with Cailan dead, and no other heir—this is not what I wanted for him, my lady. Know that. Of course, his life as a Gray Warden could not be said to truly be his own, either."

"Granted," Gwyn said tersely. "But you resigned your right to a desire as to what Alistair's fate would be when you allowed your wife's insecurities to drive you to give him to the Chantry, ser. You are not a man that thinks with his heart. You cut him deeply that day, and now you do so again."

Now Eamon understood the source of Cousland's dislike. Alistair looked to have forgiven him at last, thank the Maker, but he had told Cousland of his past with Eamon, and she was not so forgiving. She sat across from him as warlike as her mabari hound in her loyalty to Alistair, hackles raised, teeth bared, and Eamon could not deny she had a right. His treatment of Alistair had been—less than ideal.

He sighed. "Isolde—Isolde was wrong in her treatment of Alistair. No matter what I told her, she believed him to be my son, and of course I could not tell her the truth. Not then."

Cousland leveled a glance at him, and Eamon could not hold her gaze. "You could have kept her in hand," she accused him. "Even if Alistair were your son, he would have been conceived before you met. You could have persuaded her to show kindness. Instead, your inaction made you complicit in her cruelty, and you justified it when you abandoned the son King Maric had left in your charge in concession to her insecurity. He loved you!"

Gwyn Cousland kept her voice quiet, but her fury was an almost tangible force, like an electric current rising from her skin, and her eyes were ablaze.

Eamon spread his hands. "I love her," he replied. "I care for the boy, but I saw no other option."

Cousland shook her head, and her obvious disgust was as if she had slapped him in the face, all the more because Eamon knew he deserved it. That she gave it up was almost worse. "He still loves you, Maker help him," she muttered. "I am not so kind. But in the interest of the future, I can endeavor to leave the past in the past."

Eamon studied her face. "Alistair is very dear to you," he

observed.

Cousland went rigid. "He is my king, ser," she retorted. "My king and my companion. We stand together against the Blight, and together we have braved many dangers. But that he is my king—that is what I wish to discuss now. You do not believe he is capable." She did not frame her charge as a question.

Eamon dropped his gaze. "It was always assumed Cailan would leave an heir," he explained. "Alistair was not raised to be king. In truth, once we became aware he had learned of his parentage, we did our best to impress on him that he could never be king. In all usual cases, a bastard could not expect to inherit, of course. But this is not a usual case, and now, he is the only one that can take the throne."

Cousland gazed across at him coolly. "The only Theirin, perhaps. The dynasty could end. Anora could continue to hold the throne. Loghain's claim is strong—he is a hero. Without him Orlais would still occupy Ferelden. You or your brother could make a play for the throne; you are related by marriage. In theory, I or my brother—if he yet lives—could also put in a claim. Our line is older than the Theirins, and the Couslands would find support with many of the people. If it were not for the Blight, in fact, Ferelden could dissolve into quite a pretty little civil war right about now, trying to determine who has the best claim, queen or traitor, king's uncle or king's bastard or powerful noble house. We need Alistair because his claim has the best chance to oppose Anora's and win in the Landsmeet, settling the question of leadership without a civil war that will leave us unable to oppose the darkspawn."

"Would you leave Loghain and Anora in charge of the nation?" Eamon demanded.

"I would not," Gwyn Cousland answered. "Loghain is mad with paranoia, and though Anora might have led Cailan by the nose for the past five years, she clearly lacks the strength to oppose her father now."

Eamon frowned. "Loghain is quite different from Cailan."

Cousland leaned forward across the table, as if she'd been waiting for him to say this. "So is Alistair," she stressed. "Hear me, Arl Eamon. I support Alistair for the throne. But if you think to use me as your weapon, your instrument against the Mac Tirs, you are gravely mistaken. If you believe Alistair will be your puppet, even more so. It has been many years since you abandoned him to the Chantry. He is no boy now, Eamon, but a man, a man with more knowledge of duty than you could have dreamt he would learn. He did not choose this path, but he will walk it.

"Alistair will be a good king," Cousland asserted. Conviction rang in her every word. "Far better than he suspects now, and he will be his own king." She pointed her finger down at the table, tapped it for emphasis. "On the day you swear fealty to Alistair, be sure you swear fealty to Alistair, ser. Alistair is kindhearted and will forgive presumption on your part. I will not. I am his vassal in this, not yours, and in the end we must let him stand alone if he is to be the king he must be."

Eamon held back his smile only with great difficulty. He did not care that Cousland disliked him now. It seemed Alistair had found a stronger ally in her than Eamon could ever have hoped. "\_Are\_ you his vassal, my lady?" he asked her.

"I am."

"And nothing more?" he challenged her, gently.

To her credit, Cousland didn't shrink from the implicit accusation. "I did not say I was not anything more," she replied.

"Do you seek the throne?" Eamon asked.

Cousland's fingers tightened on the edge of the table. She took a long moment before she answered. "I do not seek power," she said, very carefully. "I have cause to know better than most what a heavy burden it can be."

"But you are his lover, are you not, as well as his knight and his companion?"

She didn't flinch. "I am."

"And if Alistair becomes king, and he asks you to be his queen?"

The question was one that had troubled her, he could see. Cousland gnawed her bottom lip before she answered him. Her fingers tightened on the table's edge until her knuckles were white. "Such a decision would warrant careful consideration," she said in a low voice. "Although I would point out that I am hardly unqualified, and that a betrothal to the Couslands could strengthen Alistair's case, I am not only a Cousland now. I am a Gray Warden as well. It would be a risky thing, to hazard both king and queen against the Blight." She dropped her gaze. "In addition, if my brother isâ€¦if Fergus is dead, and I wed Alistairâ€¦it would effectively put an end to my own house. Any children we had would have to be of his line, and not of my own."

"A mighty sacrifice, indeed," Arl Eamon murmured, his only fears allayed. Cousland was no fortune hunter. She did not love Alistair for what she had to gain, and indeed, it seemed she could lose much through the alliance. "Would you refuse him then?"

She hesitated. "I do not know," she admitted, granting him a straight answer at last. "If Alistair and I agreed that, despite everything, it was the best course of actionâ€¦"she broke off, and her voice fell to a whisper. "I cannot think of anything I might not sacrifice, anything I might not do, to aid him, to help him in this. Evenâ€¦even that. Even my family's name, even what others might say, that I did it becauseâ€¦"

Moved, Eamon stood. He walked around the table, took her hand, and brought it to his lips. "Our young king could have no truer friend, it seems to me, my lady. Nor a stronger ally."

Cousland stood as well. "Then we understand one another?" she asked.

"Perfectly, my lady. I do not have your belief in our young Alistair's abilities," he admitted. "But it heartens me to see you

filled with so much confidence, and I know this much: I am confident in his ability to learn. I will watch eagerly to see the king you believe he can be."

Now Cousland sighed. "He will be. My only wish is that he would not see it so much as a trap or a cage, a curse passed on him by his father and a burden he must bear. I do not like to see him so unhappy." She bowed then. "Good afternoon, Arl Eamon."

"I will see you and your companions at supper tonight?"

"It will be our honor," Cousland replied. "And we thank you for your hospitality."

Without another word, she slipped out of the hall. To find her king, Eamon presumed, and comfort him with her belief in his suitability for the role he must take up. \_Yes\_, Eamon thought. He suspected Gwyn Cousland would never care for him, but he quite liked her, actually. Alistair would sorely need a friend like her, going into the future, and it was true she would not be a bad choice as queen consort. It certainly spoke well for the boy that he'd managed to inspire the devotion of such a one. It was too bad for Teagan, though.

## 9. Denouement

**\*\*Disclaimer: Bioware's 'verse. I just play here.\*\***

**\*\*Chronology: After Paragon of Her Kind. Warden's Keep also completed. Before Nature of the Beast.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>DÃ©nouement<p>

Gwyn came out of Orzammar in the afternoon, blinking in the sun. With her were Shale and Wynne, thank the Maker, but also two dwarves Alistair didn't know. Gwyn caught sight of their fire among the camps and shops of the surface dwarves, said a word to both the dwarves with her, and the party crossed over to them. One of the dwarves went over to the liaisons from the Circle and from Redcliffe, and so Alistair knew they'd finally succeeded in securing dwarf aid against the Blight, but Wynne took the other and began introducing him to Leliana and Sten. It seemed Zevran had been right: they'd picked up another stray.

For a while things were really busy. Introducing the new members of the camp to one another, scraping dinner together for four more people than they'd been expecting, and Maker, those dwarves could eat! There was a lot of discussion about getting supplies to march the day after tomorrow, and where they would go. Winter had set in by now, and Morrigan pointed out that hunting the Dalish in the Brecilian Forest, where there wouldn't be much food available for several weeks yet, might be ill-advised. Gwyn answered just as reasonably that the darkspawn and the Blight were still on the march, and that on the other hand, they might not be able to afford to take the time to winter anywhere. In the end, they determined to purchase and barter for supplies to make for Warden's Keep. The journey was a long one, and would get them more than halfway to the Brecilian Forest. At the Keep, they decided, they could resupply with Levi

Dryden's folk, and there determine whether to head south or wait a few more weeks before seeking out the elves.

Throughout the discussion, Alistair couldn't help but observe how drained Gwyn looked, how she was keeping close to Cavall. She did that, when she was sad or scared. She was thin, too, sort of stretched, and her eyes were too bright, like she'd seen things, terrible things she would rather forget.

When all the talking was over, they'd all eaten, and everyone in camp had started drifting to their separate tents and the night was dark, she came to him. Without a word, she walked into his arms, and Alistair held her. He stroked her hair, and patted her back, and she just breathed and let him. She was so strong, almost all the time. But sometimes, he knew, she needed to let go, to let someone else be strong for her for a change.

"I missed you, Gwyn," he told her. "So much. I was worried. Five weeks. We were going into Orzammar again tomorrow, to see if anyone had heard any news."

"Again?"

"We've been in three times already, but no one knew where you were. The answer was always the same. 'She's in the Deep Roads, looking for the Paragon.' How could Bhelen make you do that?"

"It was the only way to break the stalemate in the Assembly and get a king to give us our aid," Gwyn answered. "Sending us down to the Deep Roads to look for Branka was far from the worst thing Bhelen did to become king." She was quiet for a moment. "It wasn't the worst thing I did for him, either. He'll be a strong leader, and we sorely need one. But Alistair, a good man died, because I made Bhelen king."

Gwyn buried her face in his shoulder. "I don't know how the Wardens do it," she confided. "Make these decisions based on what's necessary, ignoring what's right. Or maybe I do. I did it, after all. But I don't like it. I never will."

Alistair didn't know what to say. She wanted to hear she'd done the right thing, of course, that she shouldn't blame herself, but he knew she wanted him to be honest with her, too. Either way he was wrong, so he just kissed the top of her head, and said, "There'd be something wrong with you if you did. It weighed on Duncan, too. I remember."

He'd seemed to be doing well, but when he said Duncan's name she tensed. Her fingers tightened in his shirt, and then she broke away and turned away from him. Her fists clenched at her sides. "Doing these things because they're necessary doesn't make them just," she said. "It doesn't make them right. Alistair, there's so much they didn't tell us. So much we needed to know."

Gwyn had had her issues with Duncan before, but this seemed like something new. A heavy knot materialized in the pit of Alistair's stomach, and apprehension rose to choke him. "What did you see down there?"

For a long time, she didn't say anything, and when she did she didn't

answer right away. "Alistair, never let them take me alive," she said instead. "Kill me first. I'll kill myself, if I can, but if I can't, promise me. Promise me you will never let the darkspawn take me alive."

Alistair closed the distance between them. "What did you see?" he asked again, with new urgency. He had never seen her soâ€¦grim. So afraid. So desperate.

"Did you ever wonder where they all come from?" she murmured. "They're all male. Have you noticed? So how do they reproduce? Well. I found out. It's us, Alistair. The women they capture."

Alistair listened in mounting horror as Gwyn continued. "Dwarves lost in the Deep Roads. Humans, elves, gnomes they kidnap. The taintâ€¦it effects sexes differently. Men are the lucky ones, losing their minds, becoming ghouls, thralls to the horde. Womenâ€¦" "I'm not sure that they don't become ghouls, if they're left alone, but they're not. The darkspawn do things to them, change them. I guess it's a mixture of forced cannibalism and the worst, blackest magic, but women become these enormous, mindless beasts. There's no trace of what they were before. There's just the darkspawn, and the spawning."

She spoke in this flat, matter-of-fact tone that was somehow worse than if she'd screamed it, sobbed. Alistair gulped. He couldn't stop staring at her. Maker, she had seen this down there? "You mean the darkspawn are born of creatures that were onceâ€¦women?" His voice came out a strangled whisper.

"They're called broodmothers," Gwyn told him. "Research I found down in the Deep Roads suggests a single one can produce thousands of darkspawn in her lifetime. Turns out there's a very good reason the Wardens rarely recruit women into their ranks," she added, with so much irony and bitterness it wasn't a far cry from a spit in the face. "Unless they're damn sure a female Warden won't ever let herself get captured, to induct a woman into the Wardens is to risk adding hordes to the enemy forces."

Alistair refused to accept this. Though he'd often wondered why there were so few female Gray Wardens, it was too horrible to contemplate that they would ever risk that one of their own would be subject to such a fate. To die in battle against the darkspawn was one thing. What Gwyn described was on a whole other level, not to mention, as she pointed out, potentially counterproductive to the cause. "But that can't be," he argued. "A female Warden, if she survives the Joining, has thirty years before her Calling. Could the darkspawn even turn a woman of that age into one of those things?"

Gwyn shook her head. "Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but a Warden isn't guaranteed thirty years after the Joining," she reminded him. "Especially during a Blight. She could be taken before then, and even if she isn't, some women do remain fertile even into their fifties."

"It has to be different for Wardens," Alistair insisted. "The Joiningâ€¦it effects fertility rates. I never knew any Wardens that had children that didn't have them beforeâ€¦" he trailed off.

Gwyn's eyes had gone wide. Her legs sort of seemed to give beneath

her. She put a hand on Cavall's head for balance, staggered down and sat on a rock. She stared up at him, bone white, and Alistair rushed over to her. "Gwyn, what is it?" he pleaded. "What did I say?"

Her voice shook when she answered. "Are you saying Gray Wardens are sterile anyway?"

Alistair slowly sank to his knees beside her, hearing what he'd said as she must have heard it. "Youâ€¦you didn't know," he murmured. He felt like a fool. "Of course you didn't." He'd told her, hadn't he? Everything she knew about being a Gray Warden she'd heard from him. "Gwyn, please don't look like that," he begged her. "Don't look like that! No, Gray Wardens aren't sterile, exactly. From what I understand it's just harder for them to have children, and it gets harder and harder the further they get from the Joining, the further the taint progresses. I imagine it might be possible for a Gray Warden to have a child, if it hadn't been too long since their Joiningâ€¦" he trailed off, realizing that while he might be helping, he still wasn't exactly making things better. She had reason to be worried about this. \_He\_ had reason to be worried about this, he thought suddenly, and certainly \_they\_ did.

He met her eyes, and she saw he understood now what she'd thought of the second he'd said something. She always was five steps ahead of him, but he did get there in the end. Not that that helped much.

Gwyn let out this sort of strangled laugh, and raked her fingers through her hair. She buried her face in her hands, like she was trying to physically hold back the tears. Her shoulders shook, whether with more silent laughter, or with silent sobs, he couldn't tell, but when she dropped her hands at last her eyes were dry. "Well. We can add it to the list of \_wonderful\_ things about being a Gray Warden that they \_don't\_ tell you before the Joining\_, can't we?"

"I never thought of it, Gwyn," Alistair stressed. He couldn't get his head around how important it was she know this. "I swear. I didn't mean to \_not\_ tell you. \_You\_ have to believe me."

"No, I know," she said. But her voice was flat, gray in the darkness. She looked soâ€¦hopeless.

"It would be awfully inconvenient to make a child in the middle of a Blight, you know. I was just relieved it wasn't a huge possibility. I never thoughtâ€¦" He didn't know why he kept talking, as if there was any way he could justify his colossal stupidity, not telling her about this, not thinking about it. As if it mattered now. Alistair bowed his head, and shut up.

What she'd told him all that time ago, all the way back in Lothering came back with new significance. \_We start dying the moment the chalice touches our lips. We kill everything we were before, everything we'd ever hoped to be or do in the future, and we spend the rest of our days dying, sacrificing our lives for a victory we never live to see. \_He'd known how true it was then, but now he realized everything that it \_meant\_.\_

Back when Alistair had first joined the Wardens, it hadn't been much of a sacrifice. He'd been a penniless commoner. He'd never had a

family, and of course as a Templar he couldn't have looked forward to much of one, either. He was a bastard. An embarrassment. When Duncan had recruited him, it had seemed like a gift from the Maker, an opportunity to escape the monastery, the lyrium addiction the Chantry forced upon their Templars once they'd taken their vows. A chance to do something good with his life, such as it was. Giving his life to protect the land from darkspawn had been about the best future he could imagine back then.

Now things were different. For the first time, Alistair could taste the bitterness of the draught he had taken at his Joining, the bitterness Gwyn had tasted from her first night. They'd known it might end, of course. They'd always known any number of things that might tear them apart. The Blight. His father's blood, compounded with her family situation. After that first time, they'd never talked about it, but he'd known it weighed on her, that though it wasn't necessarily so, her responsibility to her family line very well might prove incompatible with any sort of long term attachment to him. But he'd never considered that it could be the taint that tore them apart. That they were both Grey Wardens was what had brought them together. He'd never suspected that that was what would mean they couldn't stay that way.

Now, it was as if he could see all the lives they might have had falling away into shadow. He'd had no idea, how much the hope had crept into his heart that things might work out, that two Wardens, against all odds, would somehow raise an army to defeat the Blight, kill the Archdemon, and save all of Thedas. That somehow, they'd find her brother, alive, and she'd be off the hook for securing the future of the entire Cousland family line. They'd bring Loghain to justice, with Eamon's plan or some other where he wouldn't have to be king after all, but either way, it wouldn't matter, because she'd be with him. Her hand in his, wherever they went, to Weissaupt or Denerim or the ends of the earth, her hand in his all the way to the Deep Roads at the end of the line. And he could see, he could see the children they might have had, in the Anderfells or the palace or on the roadâ€”Maker, in Higheverâ€”little scamps with hazel eyes and dimples and her brilliant brain, getting into scrapes in the town, running around with Cavall, mouths all greasy with cheese and blackberry jam he'd given them after bedtime against her express orders. Running to him with their triumphs and her with their hurts, telling them both all their plans. He could see her, all pale and exhausted, sleeping in a chair with a crick in her neck, because their child had fallen asleep in her arms, and she hadn't wanted to wake them. He'd had no idea how much he'd thought about it, someday, wanted it, someday. He'd had no idea how much he'd been growing his hopes for the future, when he'd already doomed them to execution the day the Joining chalice touched his lips. Or the day it had touched hers.

"Alistair," she whispered, "If we can't have children someday, do you even want me?"

He'd hugged her fiercely almost before she'd finished saying it. "Shut up. Of course I do. Don't be stupid."

But Gwyn was never stupid. She pulled back. "If we can't have children, and you become king and don'tâ€”with someone elseâ€”how are we doing anything but delaying the civil war a couple decades? One way or another, we'll both have to answer the Calling."

Now another future materialized in his head: a horrible future, a Shayna and Calenhad future. She'd told him, hadn't she? She'd predicted she couldn't be Mairyn and Shayna for him, not now she'd joined the Wardens. He'd told her it was nonsense, but now he could see it. They'd have to have an heir, so they'd make him marry a Mairyn, and Gwyn would be there, just like she'd always been. His first knight. His advisor and his friend. The Warden Commander, or a Chancellor or something. Maybe the teyrna of Highever. One day, she'd marry someone else, too. He'd have to invite Gwyn and her lord husband to state dinners. He'd meet her children, children with hazel eyes and her brilliant brain that looked like someone else. And if she wasn't with him, not like they were now, someday, decades down the road, he'd get a message, if the Calling came to her first. Some page boy would come to his study or the great hall or the garden and tell him that Lady Gwyn had gone all alone with her dagger out to the woods one day, and...

No. No. Alistair hugged her to him again, didn't relax his arms for her to pull back again, until she gave in and hugged him back just as desperately. "We could always rethink this whole 'make me king' business," he murmured into her hair. If he wasn't king, they wouldn't make him have an heir with someone else. There'd be no children, but they could stay together. Her hand in his, wherever they went, until the end of the line.

Her tears were wet on his cheek as she kissed his cheek, his forehead. "We're not rethinking the make you king business," she told him. "We've talked about this. It's the best option. You're the only one with a chance of deposing Loghain and Anora peacefully, and it's the absolute best way to ensure your safety. And you'll be good, Alistair. You'll be an amazing king. That hasn't changed, whatever we've learned here."

He couldn't argue, so he held her in silence. Part of him wanted to beg her just to run with him, to forget their responsibilities and just go, where there weren't any darkspawn or any traitorous usurpers to depose, no kingdoms to save and no nobles to demand they have children they might never be able to conceive. But Alistair knew if they did that, they could never be happy together. He could never abandon his responsibilities as a Grey Warden, and if he were truly honest with himself, if she was right and he was the best option for the kingdom, he wouldn't abandon his responsibility to lead it, either. Not to say that he didn't think the kingdom was doomed, if he became king. And Gwyn—he knew she wouldn't abandon her responsibilities, either. She railed against them. She hated she'd never had a chance to learn them all before she'd signed on with the Grey Wardens. She was as miserable that her responsibilities would tear them apart as he was. But she would do her duty. It was one of the things Alistair loved most about her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her ear.

She sobbed once. He felt her convulse. Almost immediately she stifled it. Now she was being strong with him, too, and that was just another blow. But she said, "I'm sorry, too."

Alistair's heart had sunk all the way to the bottoms of his boots. His chest throbbed where it had been, and his lips felt like lead as he made himself ask, "Should we end it?"

She squeezed him all the tighter then, so tight it hurt, but as opposed to the ache in his chest, this was a good hurt. This hurt meant she was still there. "Not yet."

Alistair turned his head to kiss her hair. "Okay," he promised. They would make the most of the few weeks, or months, or however much time they had left.

He pulled back, still gripping her shoulders. "I won't stay behind again," he warned her.

She nodded. "I won't ask you. I missed you, too."

He let her go, and looked down. "Gwyn. About what you saw. What you asked me to do. If the darkspawn"

She shuddered, and wrapped her arms around herself tightly. "I'm not sure you're right"that it wouldn't work on a Warden, that they couldn't turn even a barren woman into one of those monsters," she muttered. "This is dark magic we're talking about. The worst, most horribleeven if it wouldn't work, what if they tried it anyway?" She turned away from him. "I'm never going back there," she vowed. "I don't think any female Gray Warden would, if she knew. You can't ask me to let them"I'm ending it. If they ever take me, or when I hear my Calling."

Looking at her, Alistair felt heavy, exhausted beyond measure. He wondered if that was how Duncan had felt, looking at her. Had he known what darkspawn did to the women they captured, like she seemed to think? Had it been another decision he'd made for the greater good, like the decision she'd made in Orzammar to side with Bhelen Aeducan? That she'd be more of an asset to the Order than a risk?

"I understand," he said. She shook her head. "Gwyn, I get it," he repeated. "But you can't ask me to help you. If I ever think you're going to be taken, I won't give up. I'll rescue you, or die myself. But I can't"I \_will not be able\_ to kill you."

She turned, looked up into his face, and he smiled, shrugged. "And if we get through this, and you hear your Calling before I do"don't go alone," he murmured. "Whatever happens to us, don't go alone. Don't let them come tell me one day that you've just gone out into the woods with your dagger and"don't go alone." He was basically begging, but he didn't care. "Not that it won't break my heart, however you go, but please, if you hear it first, send me word. Wait for me. Let me be there. Then I can"

He couldn't go on. She stared up at him for a long moment. She tried to smile, couldn't. She half raised her hand, as if to touch his face, but let it fall. "Wynne tried to tell me," she murmured. "Alistair" she trailed off, and when she spoke again her voice fell into a new cadence. She half-sang the words from the old ballad from memory:

"'\_He shone brighter than a sun in the heavens\_

\_He fell just as quickly as the dusk\_

\_But Calenhad, father of Ferelden, did not rise again.'" \_

Alistair shuddered. There it was, just like the first time, but even worse. Telling him she loved him, she believed in him more than he deserved, at the same time she was warning him it wouldn't lastâ€"couldn't last. This time, when she raised her hand, she didn't drop it. She brushed her fingers through his hair, caressed his cheek. "Not for me, darling," she said. "Never for me."

Alistair looked down at her. Her wide, serious, wise eyes. The hazel color had always been a little shocking in the pallor of her face. Her eyelashes were all stuck together with the tears she'd cried, and the ones she hadn't. Her nose was just a little too long. He loved that about her. Somehow it made her even prettier to him, that her nose was just a little too long, because it made her real. Her mouth was still wavering, on the edge of either a smile or a sob.

\_Not for me. \_Maker, as if he'd had a choice! Alistair kissed her cheeks, her nose, and played with the ends of her hair. "Don't tell me you aren't worth it," he defied her.

She didn't answer, but caught his hand. "Come with me. It's late, and we've lost a lot of time."

## 10. A Proposal

**\*\*Disclaimer:** It occurred to me recently that the plot of **\*\*\_\*\*Dragon Age\*\*\_\*\*** is actually very similar to a juvenile novel I once tried to write. Plucky young woman and only brother are orphaned in the backstory. Young woman travels with the secret son of a former king, who lives as a commoner and becomes her love interest, and also a witch desperate to escape the authority of a powerful and malevolent guardian. Witch gets knocked up over the course of the story. Main conflict is with outside invaders with sinister powers, but the subplot of the succession of the throne is almost as important. I even named Cousland after one of the characters in my novel, now I think of it, only "Gwyn" was the witch, not the protagonist. I'm trying to remember if I had the idea first or not, but even if I did, it was never copyrighted. I gave it up as trash before I was sixteen years old, I think. All this to say even if I had a similar idea once, and maybe before **\*\*\_\*\*Dragon Age\*\*\_\*\*** came out, I would have no legal rights to it now. Le Sigh. If only my execution was better. Or I had the perseverance and confidence to work on my original stuff until it didn't suck. Then they'd be writing fanfics of my novels and movies and video games. **\*\***

**\*\*Chronology:** The night before the Landsmeet.**\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>A Proposal<p>

It was well into the second watch of the night. Gwyn opened the door to Alistair's room slowly, careful not to make a noise that would wake anyone down the hall or alert the servants. Alistair was sitting in a chair by the hearth reading with his back to her. He spoke without turning around. "Little late tonight, aren't you?"

Gwyn shut the door behind her before she answered. "Hard for everyone to sleep tonight."

"I guess the prospect of ending a civil war or being executed for treason could be an impediment to a restful night," Alistair mused. He closed his book, and laid it down on the chest by the chair. Gwyn noted the title with not a little bit of pride. He'd been reading Arl Edarn's famous treatise on a ruler's responsibilities to the people. The work had done much to codify the Ferelden monarchy's answerability to the Landsmeet, the nobles, and the people at large. "People in the halls?" he asked.

"Many," Gwyn agreed. "Or up talking and drinking in their rooms, anyway. Better to be discreet."

"Because even if it's hardly a deep, dark secret that Teyrn Cousland's little girl has taken Maric's bastard as her lover, it's not exactly the thing to advertise it. We don't want to embarrass Eamon, Isolde, and their guests. Noble code: do whatever you want, so long as it stays behind closed doors."

As it so very often did, Alistair's levity had a bite to it. The self-deprecating strain was nothing new, but it wasn't often he sharpened his wit on her. He was on edge, tense. Gwyn swallowed. "We don't want to embarrass Eamon, Isolde, and their guests," she repeated softly. "I'm not ashamed of us, Alistair, but if our friends may have a problem with something we do, it's discourteous to make them uncomfortable. If this were camp, or our home, it would be a different matter. But it's not."

Alistair sighed. "Of course you're right. I just hate all this sneaking around" he turned and saw her for the first time, and stopped mid-sentence. His mouth fell open.

Alistair had removed his armor, taken off his boots, and untied the top half of his shirt already. Gwyn's face flamed, and she smoothed her dress. She didn't care for Lady Isolde Guerrin, but she could say a couple things for the woman. She wasn't stingy, and she knew how to dress. When Gwyn had told Isolde she wanted a formal gown made up, Isolde had gotten her one in the very latest style—a rich, brocade patterned in gold and blue and brown that suited her to perfection and Isolde had had expertly fitted for her. Isolde had also offered the services of her personal hairdresser to wash and restyle Gwyn's hair. The bunches she normally kept in the top had all been brushed out, and now her hair was glossy and soft, held back from her face with a wooden headband carved into flowers and vines, with tiny owls peeping out from amongst the foliage. For the first time since the fall of Castle Cousland, Gwyn was dressed like Teyrn Cousland's little girl, Lady Gwyn Cousland in all her finery.

Alistair's blush mirrored her own now. His hand wandered up to his hair of its own accord. "I—" "uh—" "

"Eloquent," Gwyn said, curt in her embarrassment. "Do you like it?"

He found his tongue, then. "I—" "Gwyn—" "Maker's breath, you look fantastic. Amazing. You are a goddess, and Andraste knows why you've given your favor to me, a mere mortal—" "

Gwyn smiled, and held up her hand. "Yes, yes, that's enough. There is such a thing as overdoing it."

"Is it something like wearing a ball gown as a nightdress?" Alistair wanted to know. "I mean, you're beautiful, but I don't understand. If I'd known we were dressing up tonight—"how's my hair?" He kept fidgeting with it, and Gwyn walked up to him.

She plucked his wrist away, released it, and smoothed his hair back down again. "Better before you started messing with it," she informed him. "It's fine, Alistair." She chuckled. "You're the better looking of the pair of us eight days out of ten, anyway."

"Well, I didn't want to come right out and say it—"Gwyn gasped in mock outrage, and slapped his arm. Alistair grinned. "Joking, love. In all seriousness, though: why?"

Gwyn hesitated. "I just wanted to dress up for you a bit tonight."

Alistair's face fell. "Ah. I see. I suppose it is tomorrow, isn't it? The Landsmeet. This time tomorrow, I'll be king prospective of Ferelden. Or dead."

"That's what I wanted to talk about," Gwyn told him. "Can we sit? We should sit."

Alistair gestured to the pair of chairs by the hearth. "Please. May as well hear all the grim details sitting down as standing up."

Gwyn brushed by him and took her seat, and he sat opposite her. "Are you ready?" she asked him.

Alistair made a face. "As ready as any bastard ever is to wade into the middle of a civil war, denounce a national hero, and declare himself king, I suppose." His face straightened then, and he nodded, serious now. "That is, yes. I'm ready."

"We've discussed how things will go," Gwyn said. "Eamon will present your claim to the Landsmeet, then we denounce Loghain's rule. Many people have already agreed to bear witness of his crimes and support your claim. I believe our case is strong enough the Landsmeet will rule in your favor. They'll confirm your claim."

"Then I announce I'm upholding the actions of the Grey Wardens against the Blight, order the remaining Ferelden armies to join their forces with ours, and we pass sentence on Loghain, I know," Alistair finished. "We've gone over this, Gwyn. I can do it. I can bring Loghain to justice, unite the people. Get our soldiers refocused on the Blight. I mean, if we don't do that, nothing else really matters, does it? As for the rest of it—"the actual ruling bit—"I'll have to learn that, after we defeat the Blight, but we can cross that bridge when we come to it. What worries me about tomorrow is Anora."

"She might be a problem," Gwyn conceded. "I've asked her to step down graciously and support us, but she may not. She may even speak against us. Eamon believes she might. There may be a fight tomorrow, if the queen comes out against us or if Loghain refuses to step down quietly. Even if the Landsmeet does rule in your favor, the Mac Tirs are still powerful enemies, with many allies."

Alistair sighed. "I don't want to have to kill Anora," he admitted.

"She was a good queen while Cailan was alive. The only reason she's not now is because she loves her father. I can't fault her for that. Nor for not wanting to give up the throne to me."

Gwyn was more pleased by this than she necessarily wanted to admit, in the interest that Alistair own his decision. It was almost certain that Anora would not extend Alistair the same courtesy if she won the day tomorrow. He was too much of a threat, and they had carried their movement for the throne too far now. But for all that, Anora might have her uses. But instead of saying this, Gwyn simply raised an eyebrow, leaned back in her chair, and said, "You don't have to kill her. You'll be king. It'll be your decision."

"Oh, thanks," Alistair drawled. "Because that makes me feel so much better."

"Always happy to help," she murmured. A silence stretched between them, taut as a bowstring.

Alistair broke it. He gestured to her gown. "You said there might be fighting. It'd be a shame to get blood all over your pretty dress."

Gwyn twisted her hands in her lap. She couldn't meet his gaze. "I'm not wearing this tomorrow."

"You could vote in the Landsmeet, on behalf of Highever."

"Conflict of interest," Gwyn objected. "I can't attend the Landsmeet as both a representative of the Grey Wardens and a representative of Highever. You'll need me there as a Grey Warden. In addition, I'm one of the people putting your claim forward. Eamon will have to recuse himself from the vote as well."

"That makes sense," Alistair agreed. "Thenâ€"

"Why the dress?" Gwyn finished for him. She blushed, fell silent again. "I needed it," she confessed finally. "Fancy feathersâ€"sometimes they give you the courage to say what needs to be said, when you can't say it any other way. And you needed to see me like this, too, tonightâ€"Lady Gwyn Cousland, the daughter of Bryce and Eleanor Cousland, teyrn and teyrna of Highever."

Alistair's gaze sharpened. "Why?" he asked. "What do you want to say?"

"I can help you," Gwyn said softly, now scrunching the fabric of her dress in her anxious fingers, wrinkling it. "The ruling bit. I can help. I won't rule for you, but my whole life, I've been taught the things you'll need to know. I was practically raised toâ€"

"Marry a nice young arling," Alistair recalled. He sat very still, his gaze locked on hers. "Or a bastard prince. Gwyn, is this a proposal?"

Gwyn bowed her head. "It should be my father saying this. Or Fergus, or a family friend. Well, actually, usually the man would come to us, if he was anyone else in Ferelden and most anyone out of it. You're about the only one in Thedas where we would come to you, or your

family, unless the prospective alliance was with the Orlesian empress's nephew, or Antivan royalty or somethingâ€|she was babbling. She stopped. "But there's nothing usual about this," she murmured. "My family and yours are all dead and gone, so there's just me, in a dress I begged off a woman I \_detest\_, looking like a brazen idiot as I tell you I'm not actually a bad choice, if you were looking forâ€"for a wife."

Alistair reached across and took her hands, where they were still working and clenching in the fabric of her dress. "Gwyn. Look at me," he said. "You're not an idiot. And if you are a \_bit\_ brazen, I've always admired your wayward ways. Listen: I never thought you were a bad choice. I've said it, over and over. I love you. I can't imagine being without you. I've been \_dreading\_ it, these last few weeks, how I'd possibly manage when we had to end it. But I thought that was what you wanted. If we marryâ€"things will get complicated."

Gwyn sighed. "I know. Nothing's changed. We still don't know if Fergus is alive or dead. Both of us need to have children, and it will likely be difficult enough with other people, unaffected by the taint. But justâ€"I started thinking. I love you, Alistair. I want to help you any way I can. I don't just want you to be king. I want you to be happy, too. And I thought, maybe we handle the complications, share this burden, like we've shared all the rest, because we'll handle it better together." She spread her hands, shrugged.

"If I'm wrong, if you don't think it's worth it to try, then we don't have to say another word about it," she continued, looking down. She couldn't seem to stop.

Alistair squeezed her hand until she finally did look up and meet his eyes. "You're not wrong," he said simply. He moved over in his chair, and pulled her over. Unresisting, she sat with him, half in his lap, half on the seat, and he put his arm around her. "Let's talk," he said then. "What will we do about the heir difficulty?"

Gwyn gave a helpless little laugh. "Yours or mine?"

"Both. We're going to run into the same issue either way," Alistair said calmly.

Gwyn inclined her head. "If Fergus is alive, it might not even be an issue for me," she responded. "But our first order of business after the Blight was always going to be to find him, to settle matters in Highever. If he's deadâ€"she took a deep breath, but continued. "If he's dead, I'll make sure our people are taken care of. If he's alive, but chooses not to marry again or have any children, he will."

"That's sensible," Alistair praised her. "I'll help you any way I can. Andâ€"I'm sorry."

"It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," Alistair contradicted her. "It's \_everything\_, and I want you to know how much I appreciate it right now, so you can never say I wasn't grateful when you gave up your entire teyrnir to marry me when you're cross and want to pick a fight in the future." He paused. "Huh. Maybe I should get it in writing: \_Thank you\_."

The mixture of humor and sincerity was like a warm blanket. Gwyn smiled into Alistair's chest and leaned her head against his shoulder. "As for you, that's harder," she murmured. "But we're young yet, both of us. Not too far from the Joining. We might have a little bit of time, maybe, right?"

Alistair stiffened beneath her, hesitated. "Gwynâ€"

Gwyn closed her eyes. "I know it's a long shot," she said. "But I figure we'll have all the help we need addressing any problems, and researching ways to circumvent them. Physicians, mages. There's Avernus, too. He knows more about the taint than anyone. If he can find another way to lessen its power, an ethical way, that won't turn us into monsters and doesn't require any blood sacrificeâ€"

Alistair's hands tightened on her waist, and he raised his head to look at her. "Do you think he could?"

"I don't know, but it's worth a shot, right?"

Alistair looked thoughtful. "If he could come up with something, or someone else couldâ€"I suppose there are fringe benefits to being royalty after all, aren't there? But what if we can't, Gwyn?" he repeated. "What if no one ever finds a way for us, and we never have a child? Perhaps you could, you know, with someone else."

It was like he was wringing her heart with his bare hands, saying that. To have to see the maybe she'd begun to hope against hope for the last few weeks dragged out into the light and revealed for the feeble thing that it was hurt, but she loved Alistair for it, too. For respecting her enough not to let her delude herself, however badly she wanted to do so. She could be sacrificing the Cousland line and the Theirin line together tonight. She could be giving up any chance to have children at all, all for that feeble, nigh-impossible maybe that she could be Alistair's wife and have his.

"You might be able to have a child with someone else as well," she pointed out. "If we can't, or don't right away, they'll pressure you toâ€"

Alistair had read the letter Eamon had written to Cailan, too, so he hugged her close. "You don't have to worry about that," he promised. "Never. At any rate, by the time they started worrying about you, it'd be much less likely I could have a child with anyone else, either."

Gwyn forced a laugh. "Well. That's comforting." She was silent with him for a moment, then said, "If we never have children, it might be a good thing if you do spare Anora. Thirty isn't too old, whatever Eamon thinks. She could marry again, provide a future for the kingdom-" Alistair frowned, but Gwyn was already moving on. "And if not herâ€"well. Even if we don't have children, we will have time. We can make sure Ferelden doesn't fall into chaos after we're gone."

"I agree," Alistair said. "That's all I needed to hear, Gwyn," he told her. "You're sure this is what you want?"

Gwyn leaned back to look at him. She ran her fingers through the short thatch of his hair and smiled. "I asked, didn't I?"

"Then do you accept my troth, Gwyn Cousland?" gently teasing and sweetly sincere at the same time. "To be my queen and my wife and my \_partner in every sense of the word\_?"

"I do," Gwyn replied. "If it pleases you, we'll take our chances, the bitterness with the joy."

Alistair sealed their betrothal with a kiss. "I am \_well\_ pleased, my lady," he told her. "You know, this is usually where I wake up in my dreams," he remarked. "Or where everyone starts pointing and laughing, because I'm not wearing any pants."

"No dream, darling," Gwyn told him. "This is real life, and alas, you are still wearing your pants, though your shirt is somewhat wrinkled."

Alistair looked down at her dress. "So is your pretty dress," he said, genuinely remorseful. "I'm sorry, Gwyn. I don't think court gowns are really conducive to sitting two-to-an-armchair."

"That's not generally within the parameters of their use, no." Gwyn kissed him. "Don't worry. No regrets."

"Good," Alistair murmured against her lips. "We'll announce our betrothal at the Landsmeet tomorrow."

"No more sneaking around," Gwyn agreed. "The Landsmeet is a proper forum to announce such things, and nobles like their kings married. For some reason, single kings make them nervous."

"Probably because behind any good king at all is an excellent wife," Alistair remarked.

Gwyn grinned. "Oh, you'll do just fine," she informed him, and kissed him again.

End  
file.